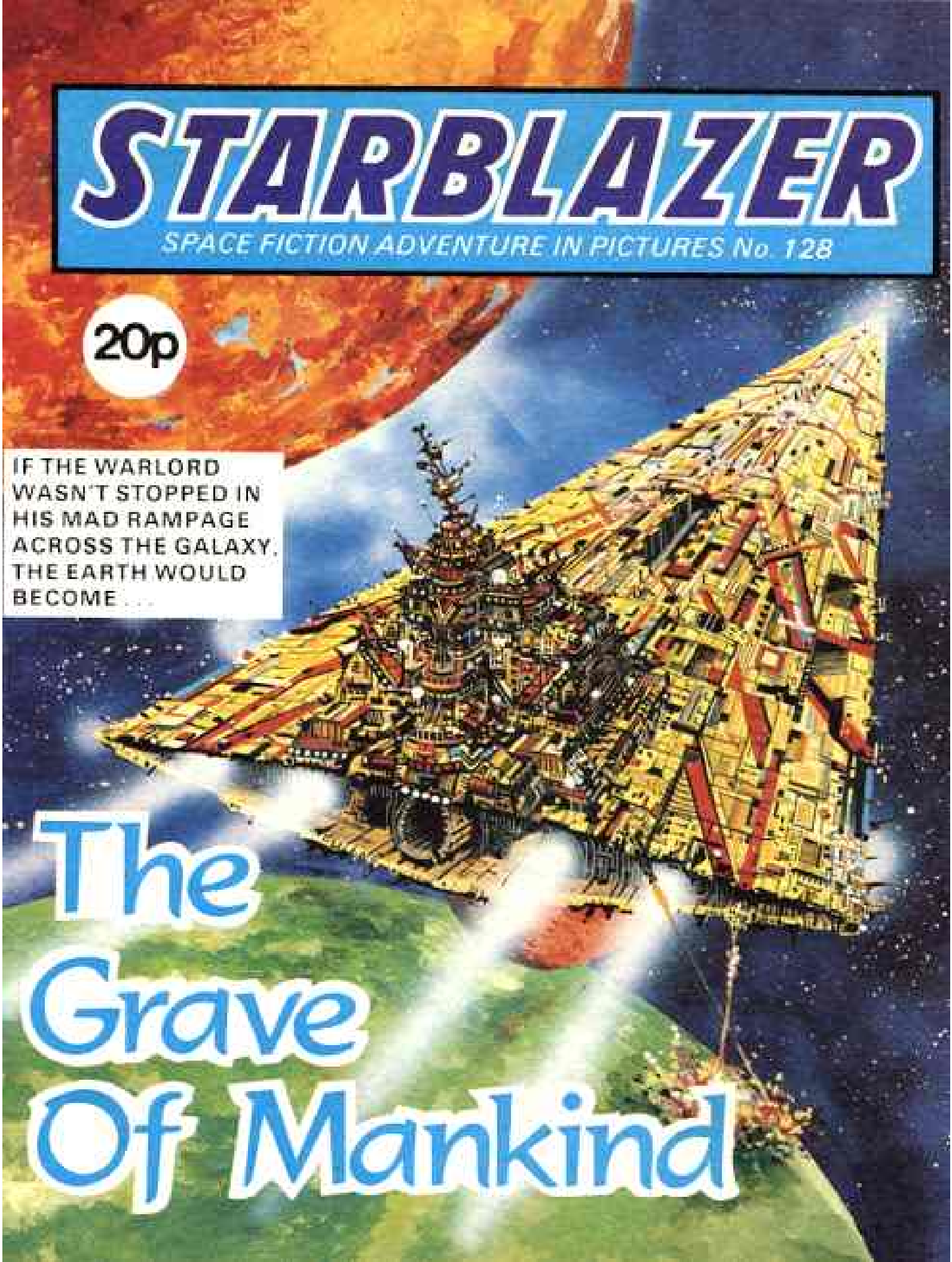
STARBLAZER

SPACE FICTION ADVENTURE IN PICTURES No. 128

20p

IF THE WARLORD WASN'T STOPPED IN HIS MAD RAMPAGE ACROSS THE GALAXY, THE EARTH WOULD BECOME . . .



The Grave Of Mankind

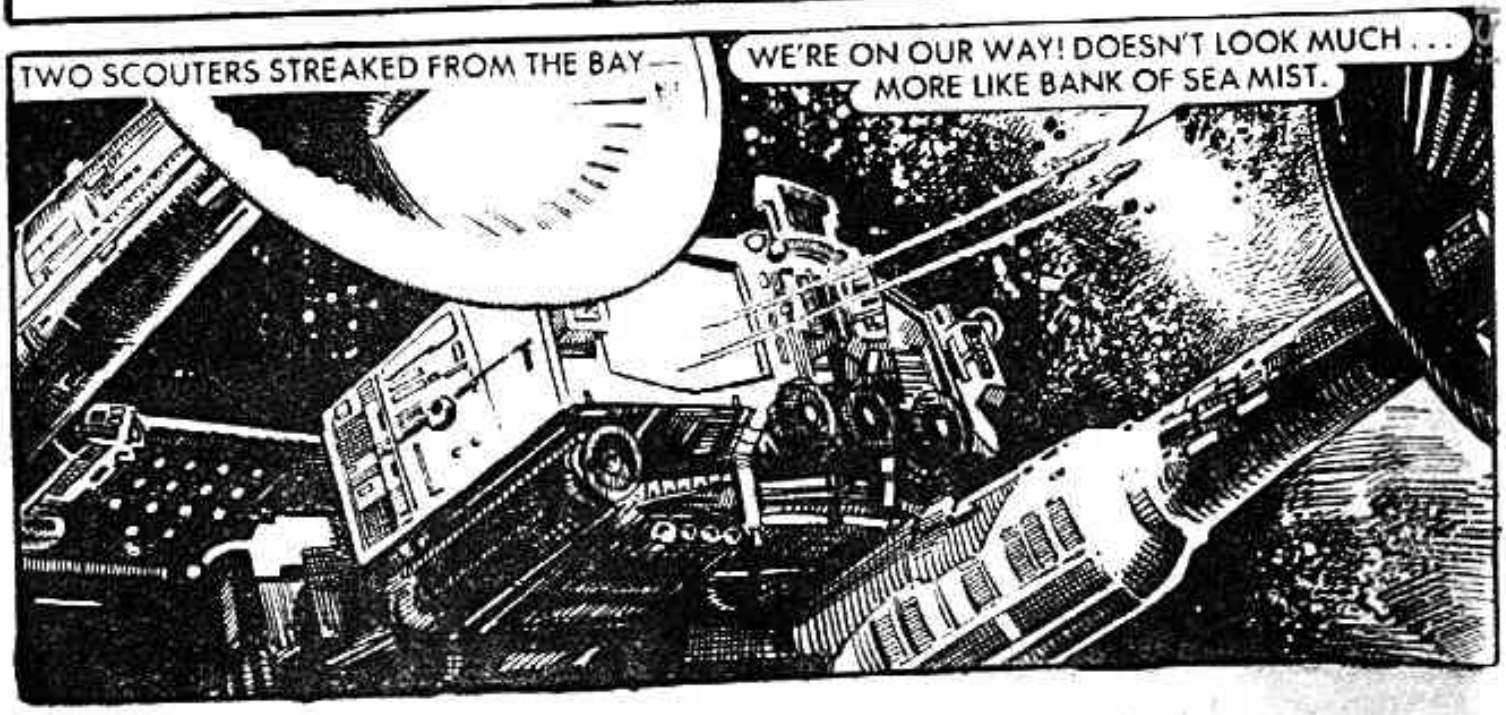
STARBLAZER

THE EARTH FEDERATION HAD GROWN AND PROSPERED WITHOUT EVER REALLY INVOLVING ITSELF IN OTHER SOLAR SYSTEMS.
IT CAME AS A GREAT SHOCK WHEN A TIDE OF ENERGY DISRUPTED THEIR PEACEFUL EXISTENCE, AND THREATENED TO MAKE EARTH —

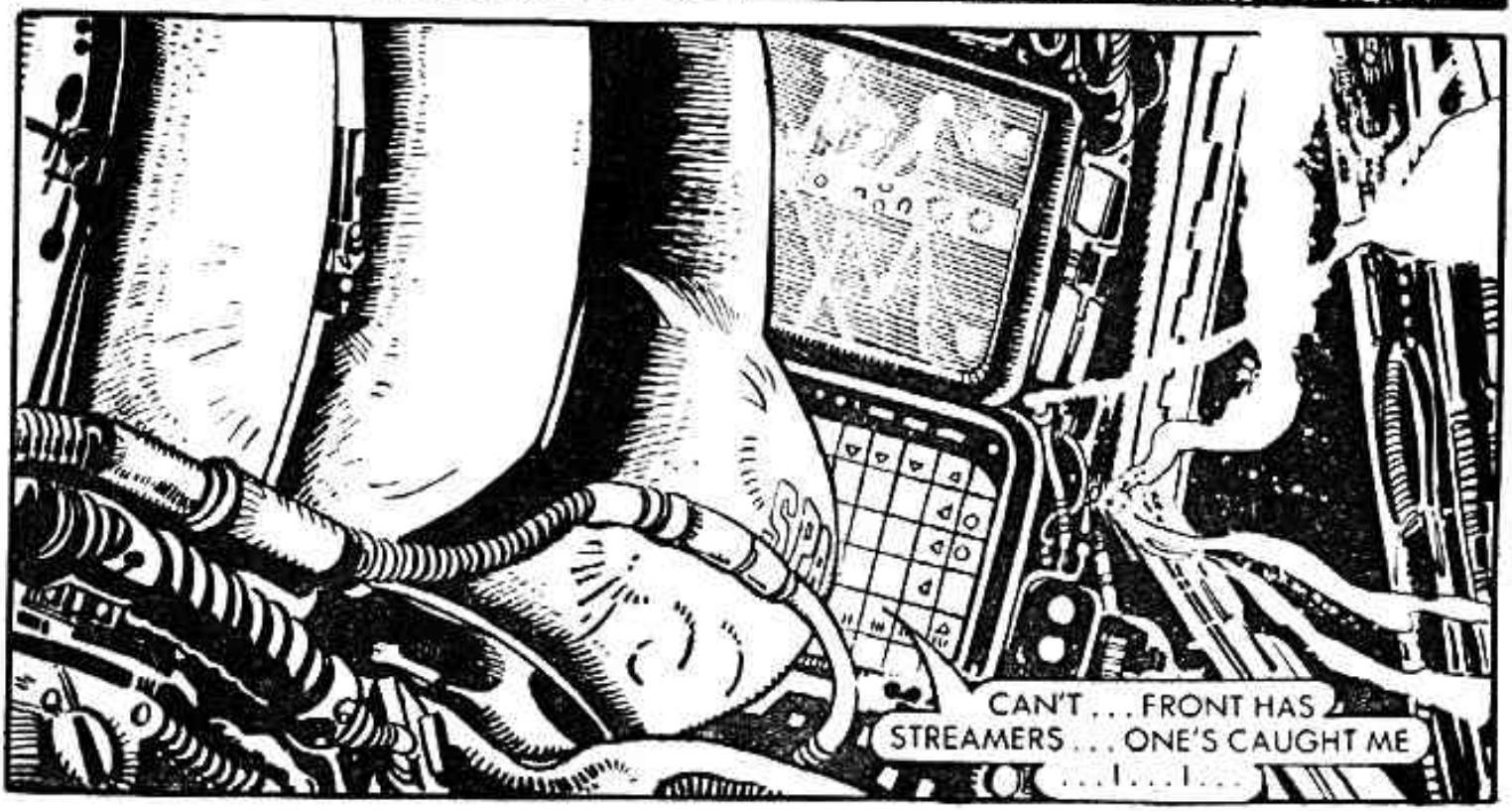
THE GRAVE OF MANKIND

EARTH SURVEY CRAFT, TREKKER, NEARED SECTOR 65-129 AT THE VERY LIMIT OF EARTH'S TERRITORY. IT HAD BEEN MONITORING A TIDAL WAVE OF ENERGY THAT STRETCHED AS FAR AS THE COMPUTER COULD SCAN.

CALL EARTH CONTROL, INFORM THEM OF THE POSITION. LAUNCH TWO FIGHTERS, I WANT THEM TO FLY TO THAT FRONT AND FIND OUT WHAT THE THING IS.
VERY GOOD, SIR.


TWO SCOUTERS STREAKED FROM THE BAY—
WE'RE ON OUR WAY! DOESN'T LOOK MUCH . . . MORE LIKE BANK OF SEA MIST.

THEY STREAKED TOWARDS THE APPROACHING WAVE OF ENERGY—
INSTRUMENTS NOT READING AT ALL . . . CONTROLS GONE . . .
VEER OFF! TRY TO FIND AN EXIT!

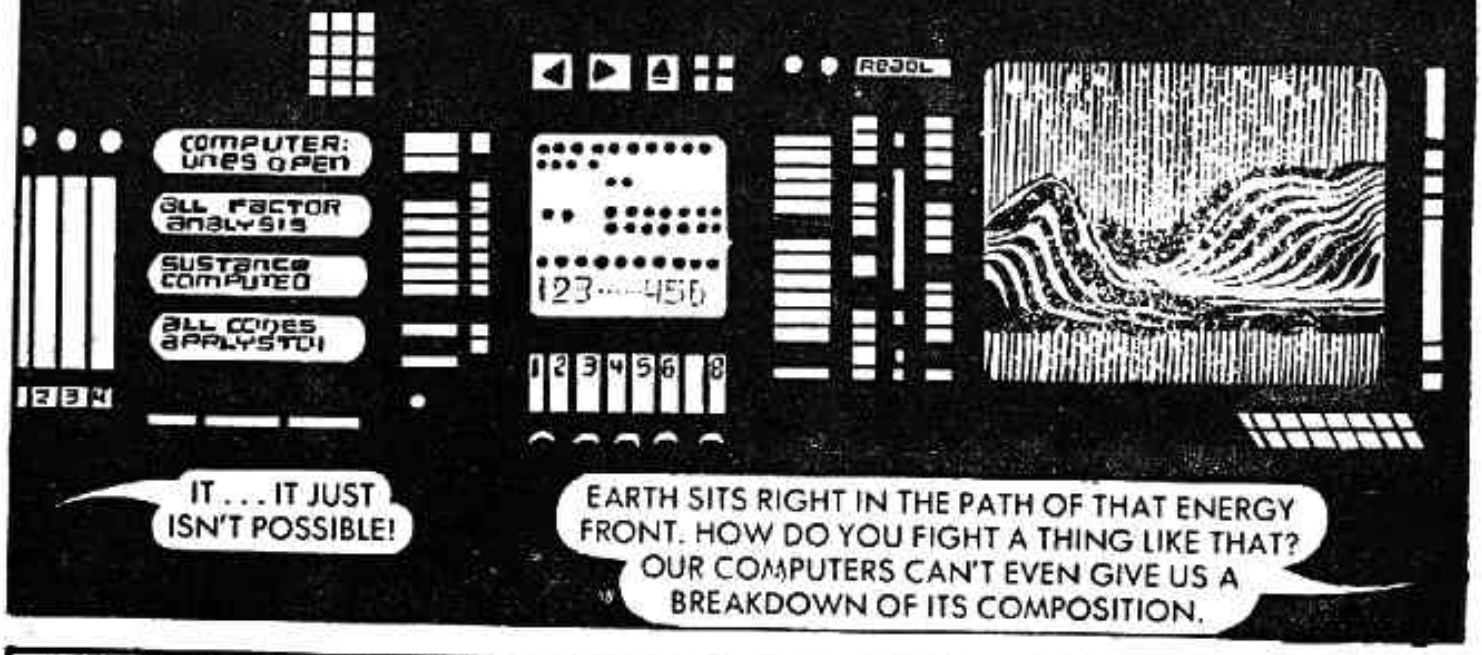

CAN'T . . . FRONT HAS STREAMERS . . . ONE'S CAUGHT ME
. . . ! . . . ! . . .

THE TWO SCOUTERS VANISHED—

THEIR AWESOME END WAS WITNESSED ABOARD ' TREKKER '—
INFORM EARTH. ORDER BATTLE STATIONS!
PREPARE TO MEET THE ENERGY FRONT.

BUT THE ' TREKKER ' WAS JUST AS HELPLESS AS THE SCOUTCRAFT.

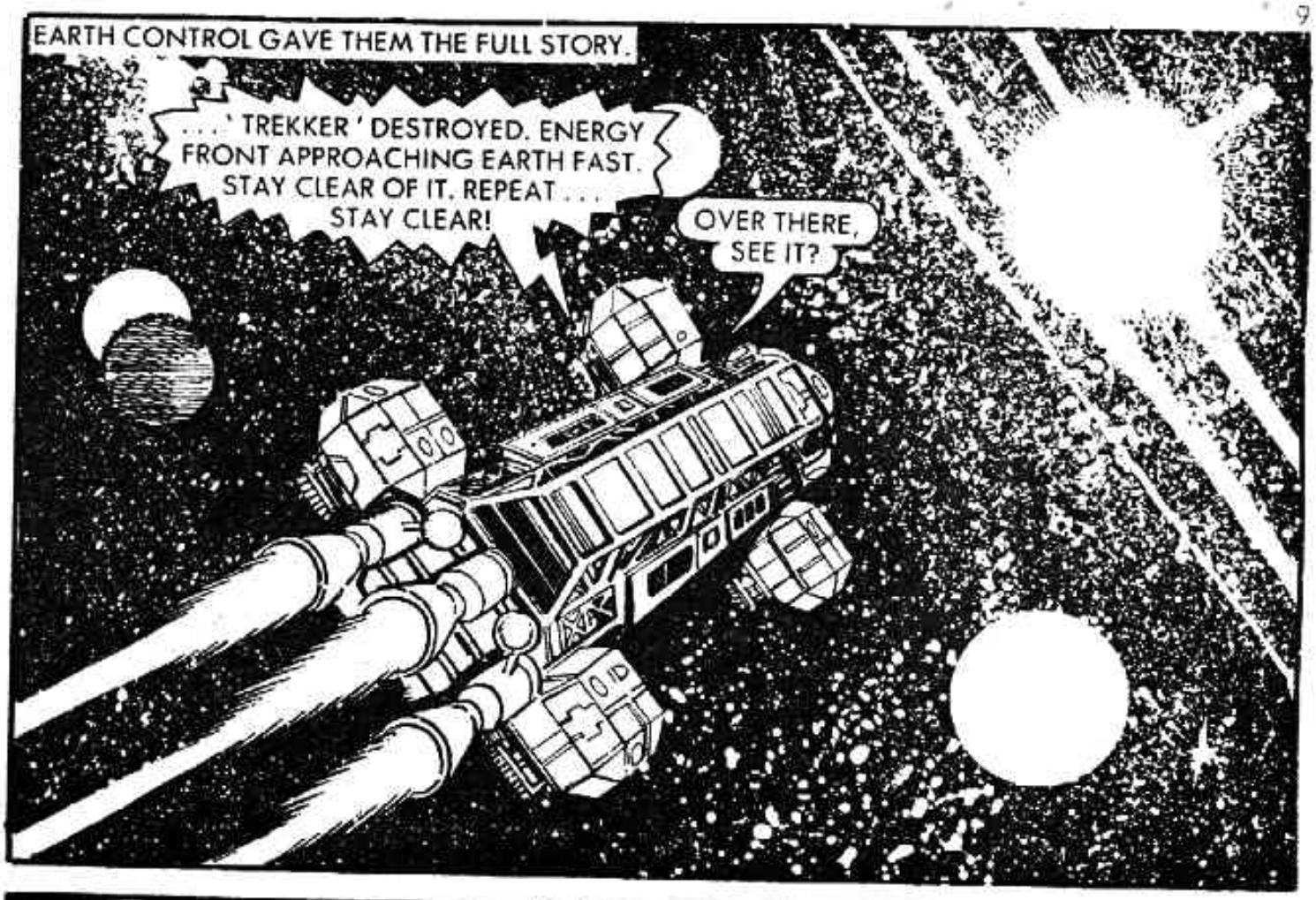
THE FINAL MOMENTS OF THE TREKKER WERE RELAYED TO EARTH BY MICROWAVE BEAM WHERE A COMPUTER RECONSTRUCTED THEM

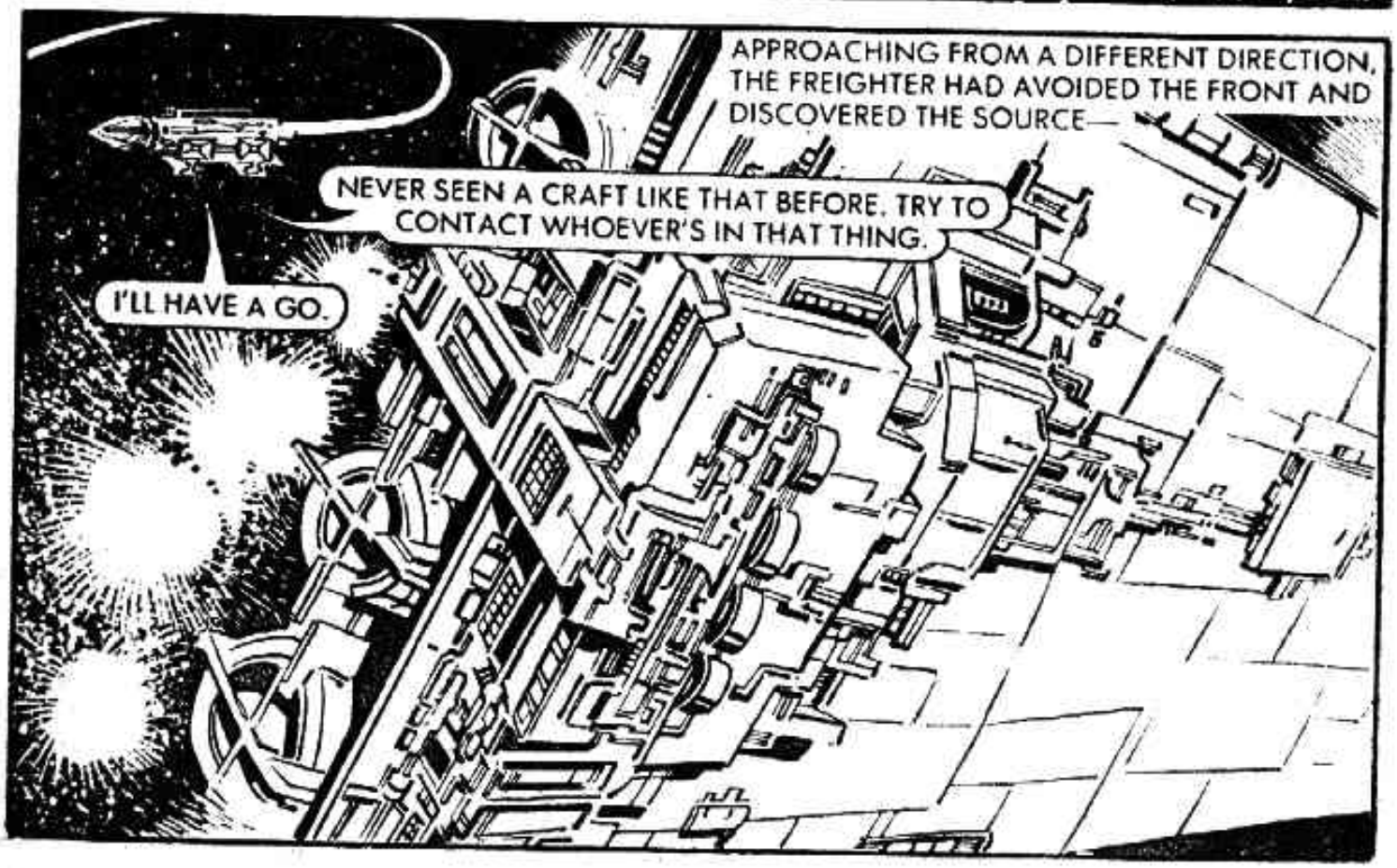


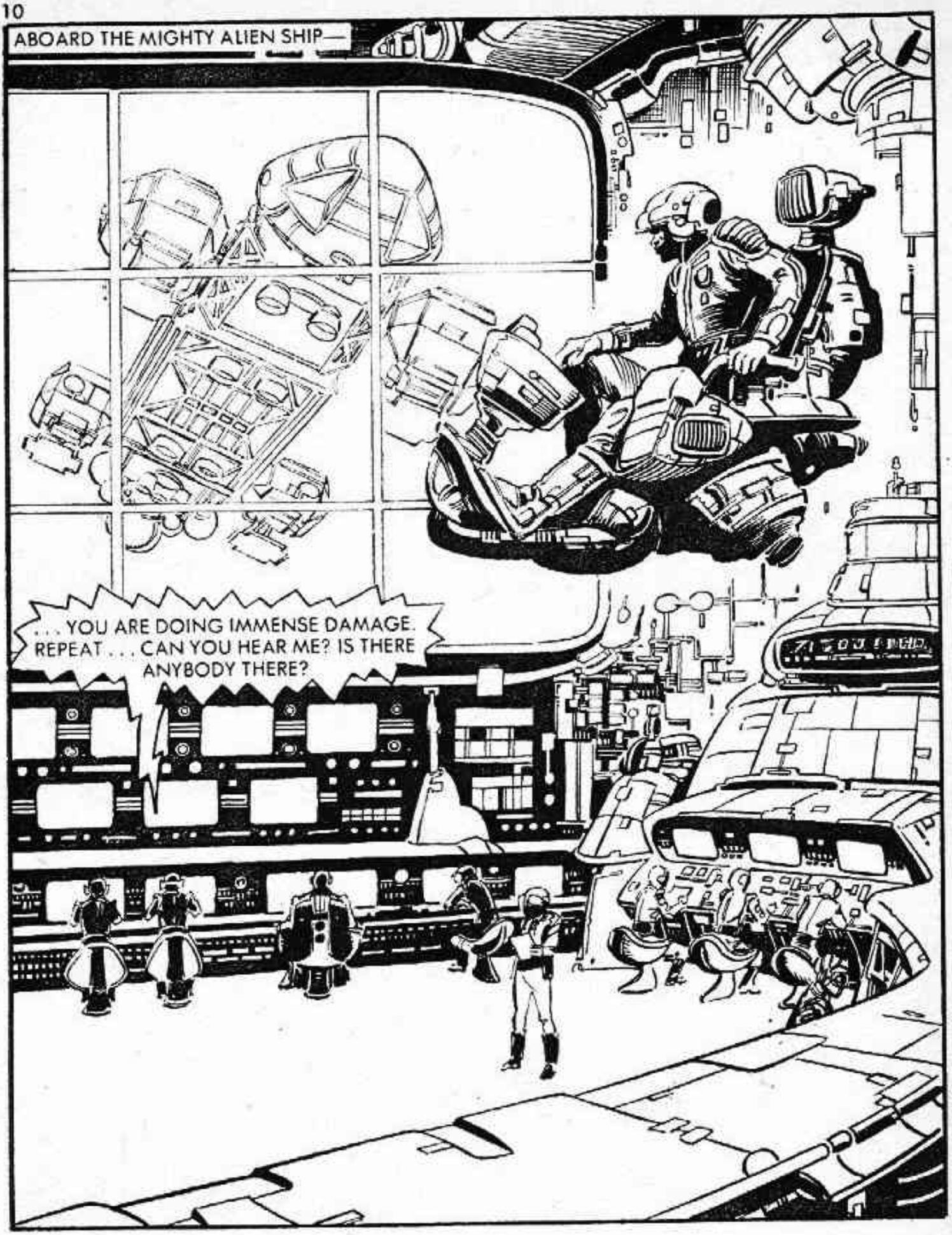
THE FRONT CONTINUED ITS INEXORABLE PROGRESS TOWARDS EARTH DESTROYING A MIGHTY ASTEROID BELT THAT HAPPENED TO BE IN ITS PATH.

FAR OUT IN SPACE, A BEATEN-UP OLD CARGO CRAFT, PILOTED BY DANE GALL, WAS RETURNING TO EARTH AFTER DELIVERING A LOAD OF MINERALS TO ALPHA SYSTEM.

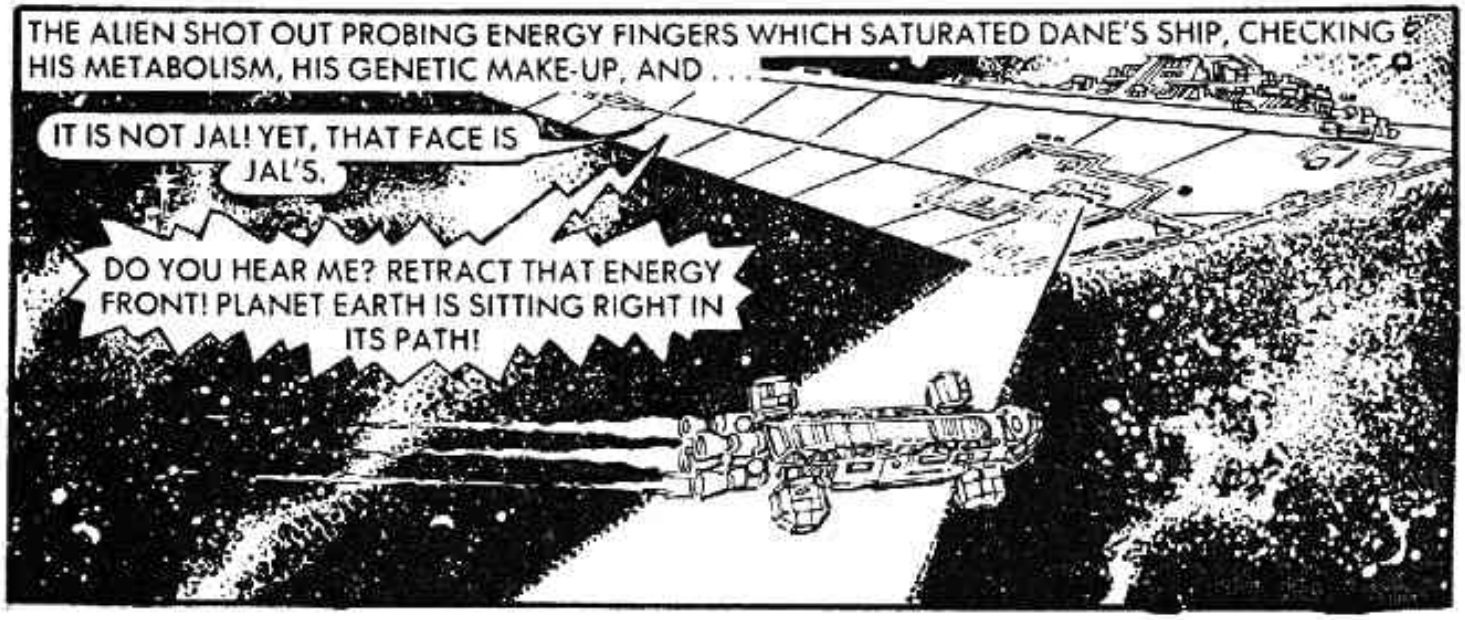
FUNNY, DANE—THE SHIP'S MISFIRING.
THE REACTOR IS STABLE, PRIL. IT MUST BE AN AREA OF HARD MAGNETISM. CHECK WITH EARTH CONTROL, THEY MIGHT HAVE SOME DATA FOR US.

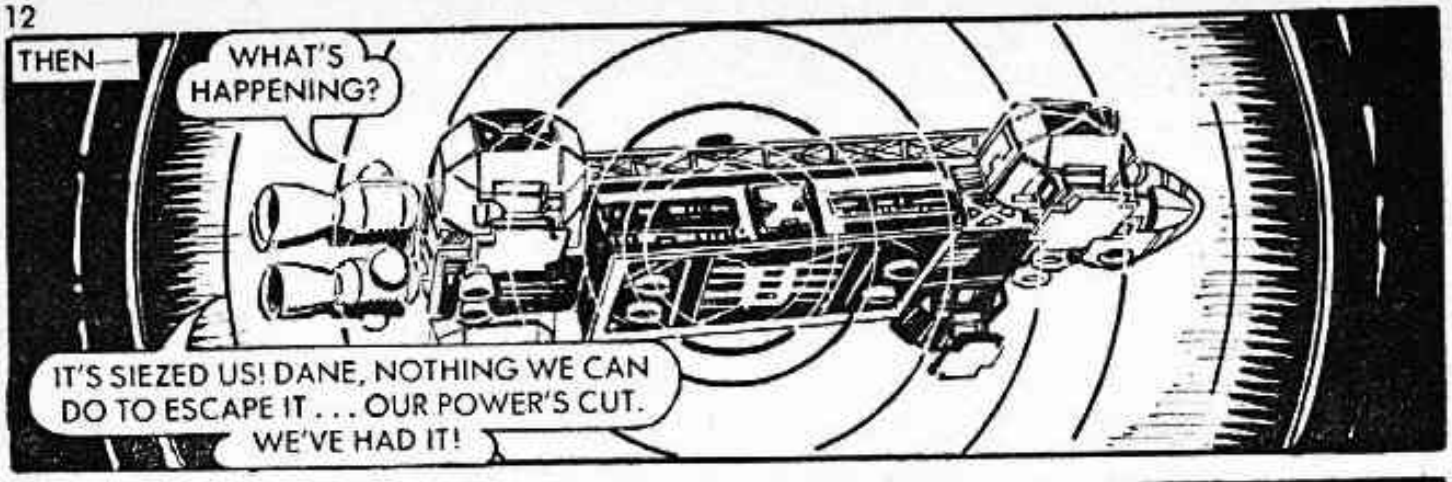

EARTH CONTROL GAVE THEM THE FULL STORY.
. . . ' TREKKER ' DESTROYED. ENERGY FRONT APPROACHING EARTH FAST. STAY CLEAR OF IT. REPEAT . . . STAY CLEAR!
OVER THERE, SEE IT?


APPROACHING FROM A DIFFERENT DIRECTION, THE FREIGHTER HAD AVOIDED THE FRONT AND DISCOVERED THE SOURCE—
NEVER SEEN A CRAFT LIKE THAT BEFORE. TRY TO CONTACT WHOEVER'S IN THAT THING.
I'LL HAVE A GO.


ABOARD THE MIGHTY ALIEN SHIP—
. . . YOU ARE DOING IMMENSE DAMAGE. REPEAT . . . CAN YOU HEAR ME? IS THERE ANYBODY THERE?

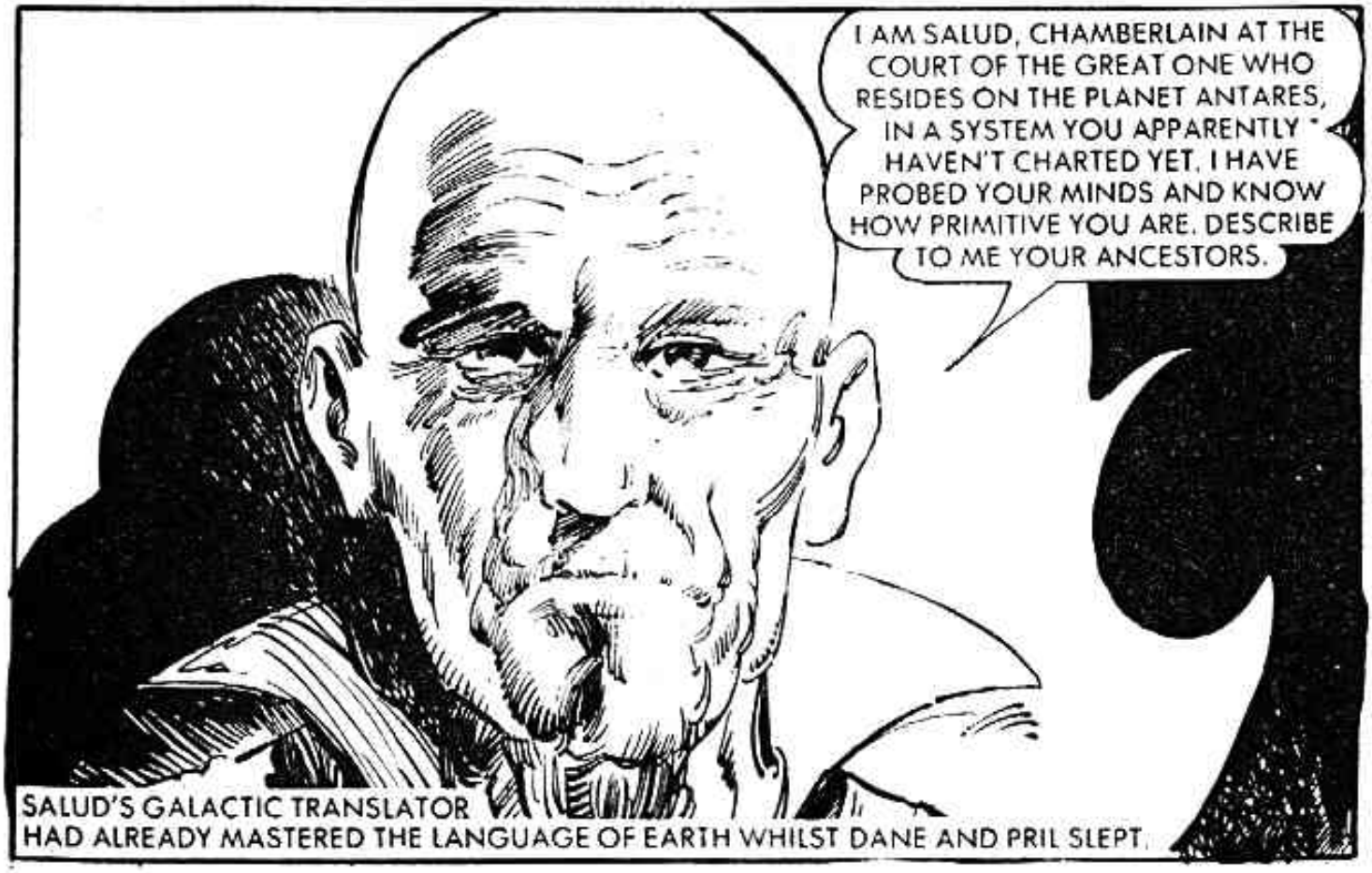
DANE TRANSMITTED THROUGH THE GALACTIC TRANSLATOR—AND A STRANGE ALIEN TONGUE CHATTERED.
. . . REPEAT . . . DO SOMETHING ABOUT YOUR ENERGY FRONT. IT'S DESTROYING EVERYTHING IN ITS PATH. CAN YOU HEAR ME?
IT'S HIM! BUT . . . BUT HOW IS THAT POSSIBLE? SPEAKING SUCH WORDS.


THE ALIEN SHOT OUT PROBING ENERGY FINGERS WHICH SATURATED DANE'S SHIP, CHECKING HIS METABOLISM, HIS GENETIC MAKE-UP, AND . . .
IT IS NOT JAL! YET, THAT FACE IS JAL'S.
DO YOU HEAR ME? RETRACT THAT ENERGY FRONT! PLANET EARTH IS SITTING RIGHT IN ITS PATH!


THEN—
WHAT'S HAPPENING?
IT'S SIEZED US! DANE, NOTHING WE CAN DO TO ESCAPE IT . . . OUR POWER'S CUT. WE'VE HAD IT!

ONCE WITHIN THE MIGHTY CRAFT'S LAUNCHING BAYS, ROBOTS CARRIED OUT THE UNCONSCIOUS EARTHMEN.
BRING THEM TO ME! LEAVE THEIR SHIP INTACT, I MAY WANT TO STUDY IT FURTHER.

THE OLD MAN RE-AWAKENED THEM—
2
WHY DIDN'T YOU ANSWER?
BE SILENT! TALK WHEN I ASK YOU QUESTIONS.


I AM SALUD, CHAMBERLAIN AT THE COURT OF THE GREAT ONE WHO RESIDES ON THE PLANET ANTARES, IN A SYSTEM YOU APPARENTLY HAVEN'T CHARTED YET. I HAVE PROBED YOUR MINDS AND KNOW HOW PRIMITIVE YOU ARE. DESCRIBE TO ME YOUR ANCESTORS.
SALUD'S GALACTIC TRANSLATOR HAD ALREADY MASTERED THE LANGUAGE OF EARTH WHILST DANE AND PRIL SLEPT.

WHAT DO YOU MEAN?
LOOK INTO THAT SCREEN.
I HAVE SPARED YOU BECAUSE YOU HAVE THE FACE OF PRINCE JAL . . . THE ONE I AM SEEKING. YOU ARE NOT JAL, THIS I KNOW. BUT SEE FOR YOURSELF . . . THAT IS JAL, MY PRINCE.
SALUD TOLD THEM HIS STORY—

THE GREAT ONE FOUGHT WITH HIS SON, JAL, SOME EARTH YEARS AGO. BITTER WORDS WERE SAID. JAL, WHO ALWAYS RESENTED HIS TRAINING FOR KINGSHIP, LEFT IN A SHIP, TAKING WITH HIM A FEW OF HIS WILD COMPANIONS. NOW THE GREAT ONE'S FURY HAS COOLED. HE GROWS OLD AND ONLY JAL CAN INHERIT. I WAS SENT IN THIS CRAFT TO FIND HIM, TO PERSUADE HIM TO COME HOME. FOR MANY MONTHS I HAVE RIDDEN THOUGH SPACE, I GROW WEARY OF IT. I HAVE FOUND NO TRACE OF MY PRINCE. NOW . . . I LOCATE YOU, AN EARTHMAN, WEARING HIS FACE. I WANT TO KNOW WHY.

I DON'T KNOW HOW I MIGHT BE ABLE TO HELP YOU FIND THIS JAL. BUT IF YOU SWITCH OFF THAT ENERGY FRONT AND SPARE MY HOME PLANET, MAYBE WE CAN HELP.

I WILL DO AS YOU ASK.
RIGHT . . . WE'LL CHECK WITH THE ARCHIVISTS.

DANE GAVE SALUD THE LOCATION OF THE ARCHIVISTS, AND THE MIGHTY CRAFT STREAKED AWAY ON ITS NEW COURSE.

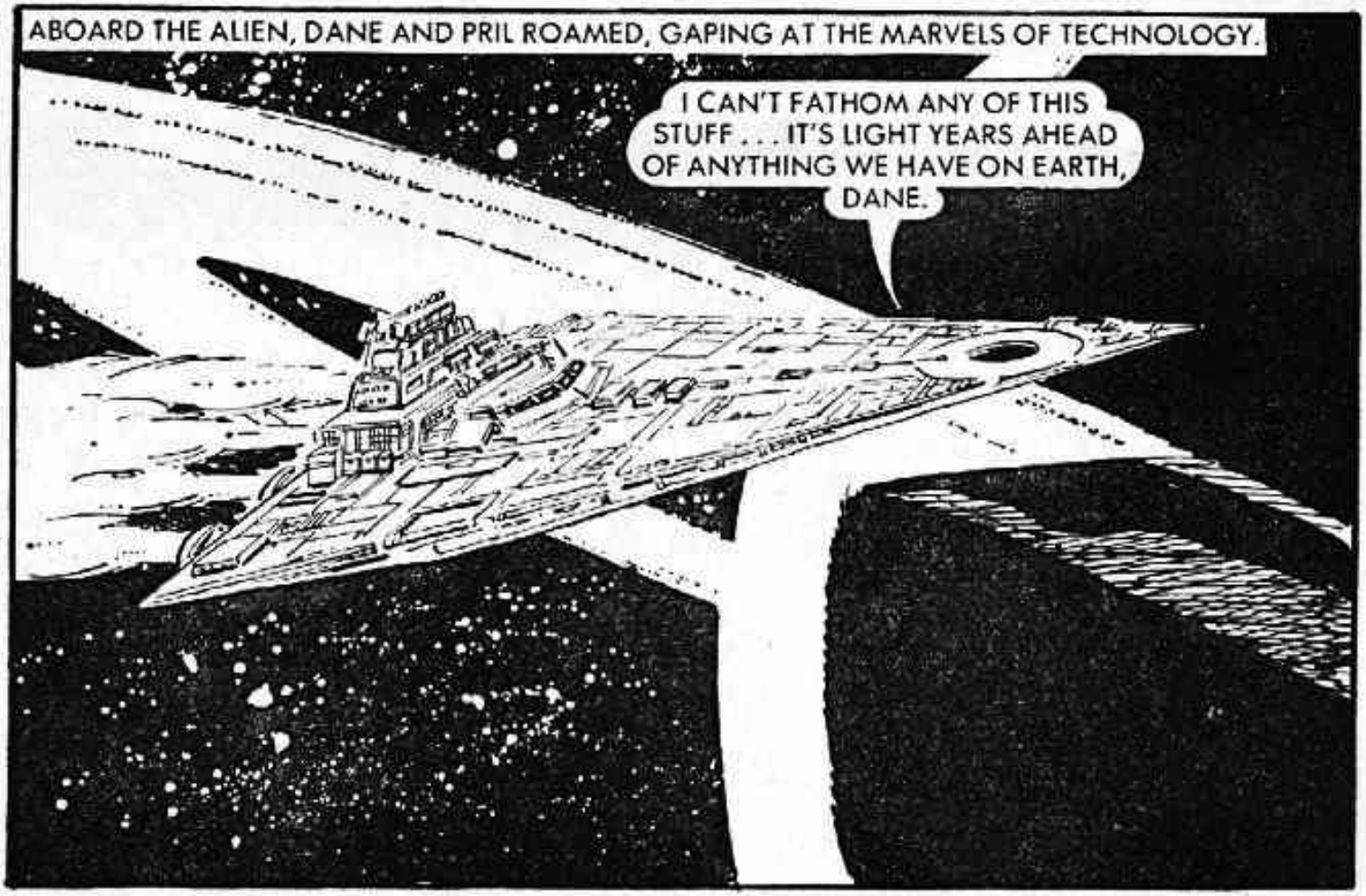
THESE ARCHIVISTS . . . WHO ARE THEY? HOW WILL THEY BE ABLE TO HELP ME?

THEY'RE MYSTICS, SOMETIMES CALLED THE WATCHERS, SITTING FOREVER ON A SATELLITE THAT'S NOTHING MORE THAN A COMPUTER. THEY TRACK EVERYTHING . . . ANYBODY WHO COMES INTO THIS SEGMENT OF THE UNIVERSE IS NOTED AND FOLLOWED. NOBODY KNOWS WHY THE ARCHIVISTS DO IT . . . THEY JUST DO. IF JAL CAME THIS WAY, THEY'LL HAVE IT ON RECORD.

YOU MAY WALK THE SHIP AS YOU PLEASE, THOUGH I DOUBT THAT YOUR WORM-LIKE MINDS WILL BE ABLE TO UNDERSTAND MUCH OF WHAT YOU SEE. YOU ARE STILL CAPTIVES, REMEMBER THAT. YOU WILL STAY WITH ME UNTIL JAL IS FOUND. ANY TRICKERY AND I WILL KILL YOU BOTH AND RESUME MY COURSE TO DESTROY THIS PLANET YOU KEEP GOING ON ABOUT.

WE'LL CALL EARTH AND TELL THEM WHAT WE'RE DOING.

EARTH CONTROL BEGAN TO RELAX—
KEEP US INFORMED!


ABOARD THE ALIEN, DANE AND PRIL ROAMED, GAPING AT THE MARVELS OF TECHNOLOGY.
I CAN'T FATHOM ANY OF THIS STUFF . . . IT'S LIGHT YEARS AHEAD OF ANYTHING WE HAVE ON EARTH, DANE.

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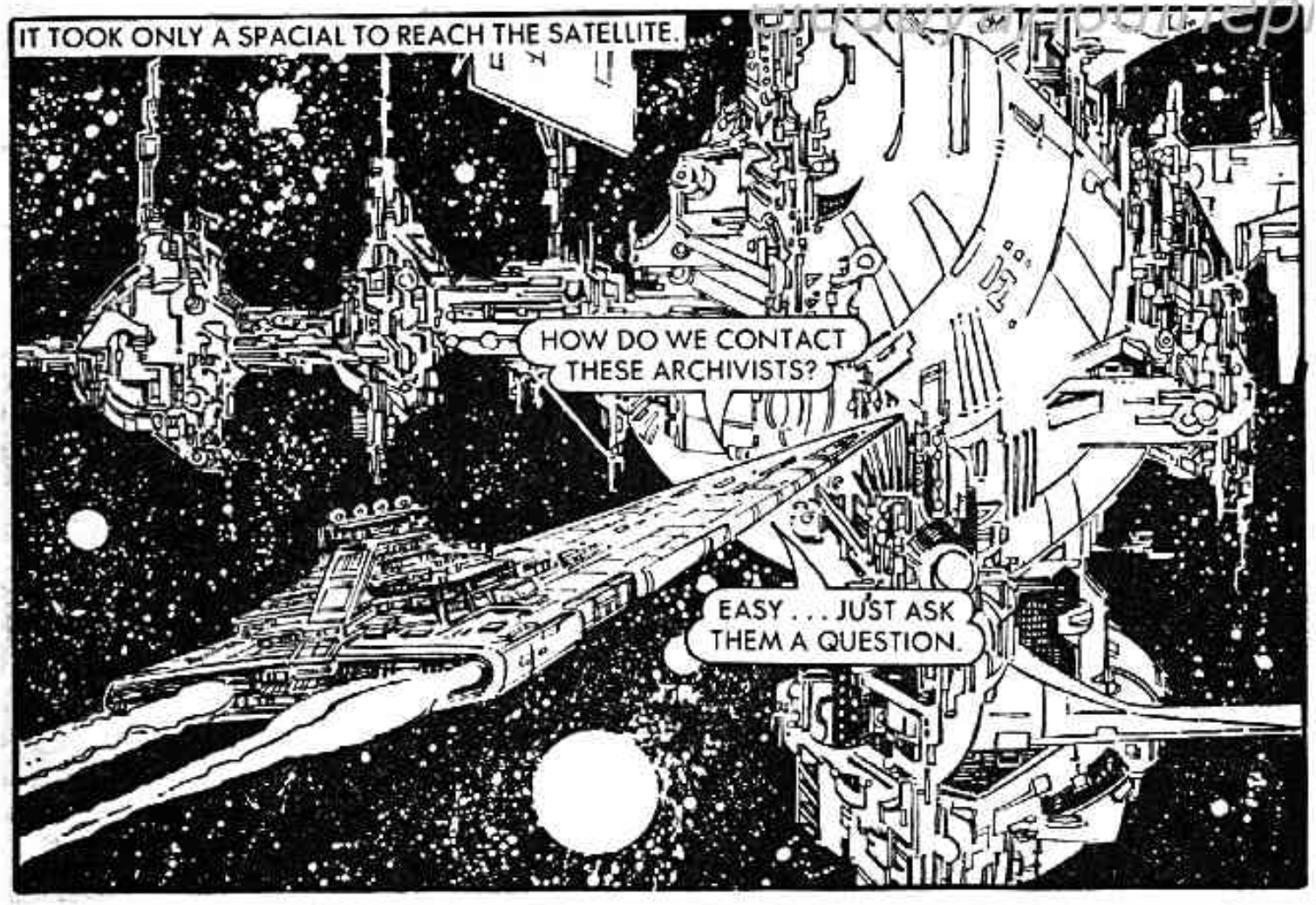
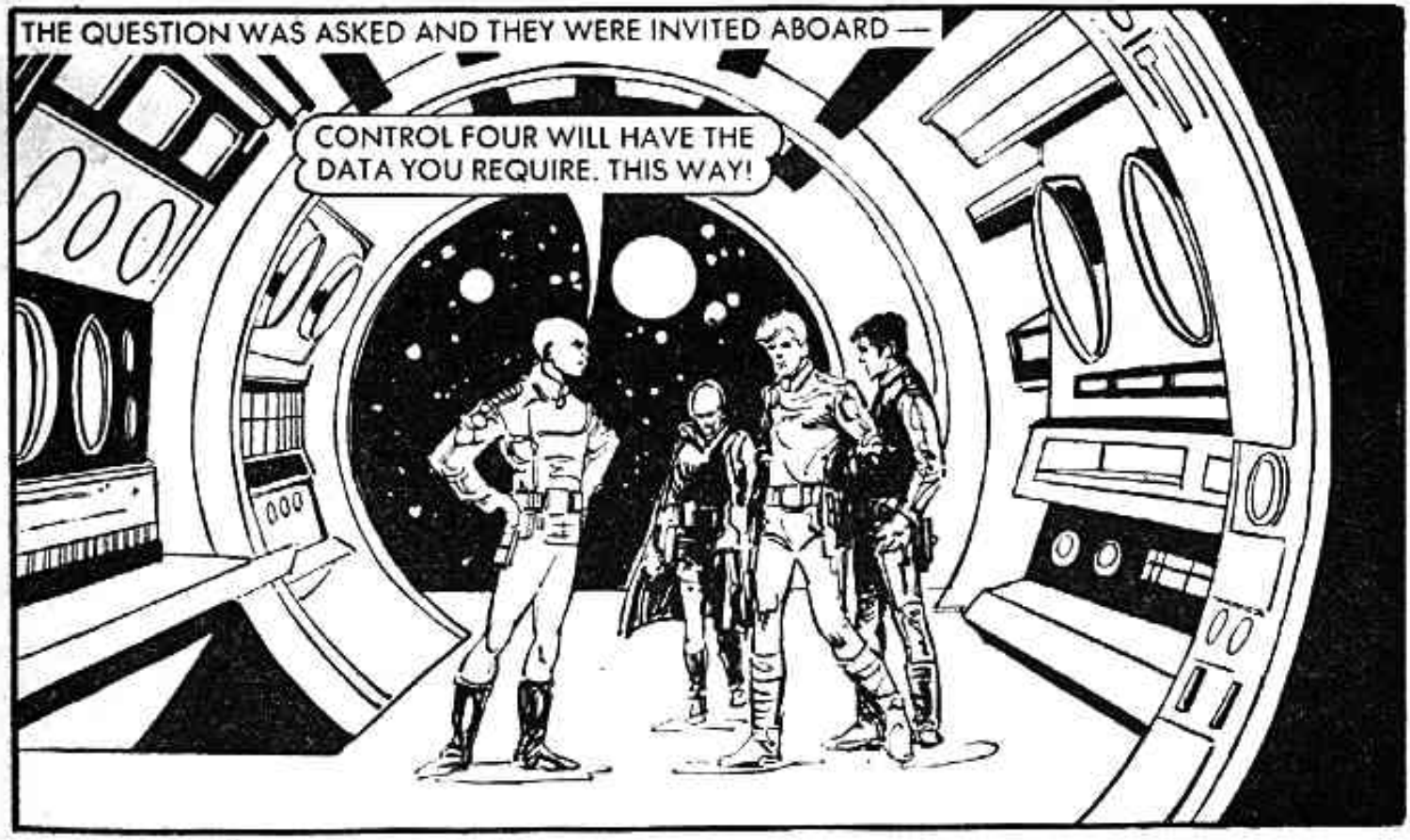
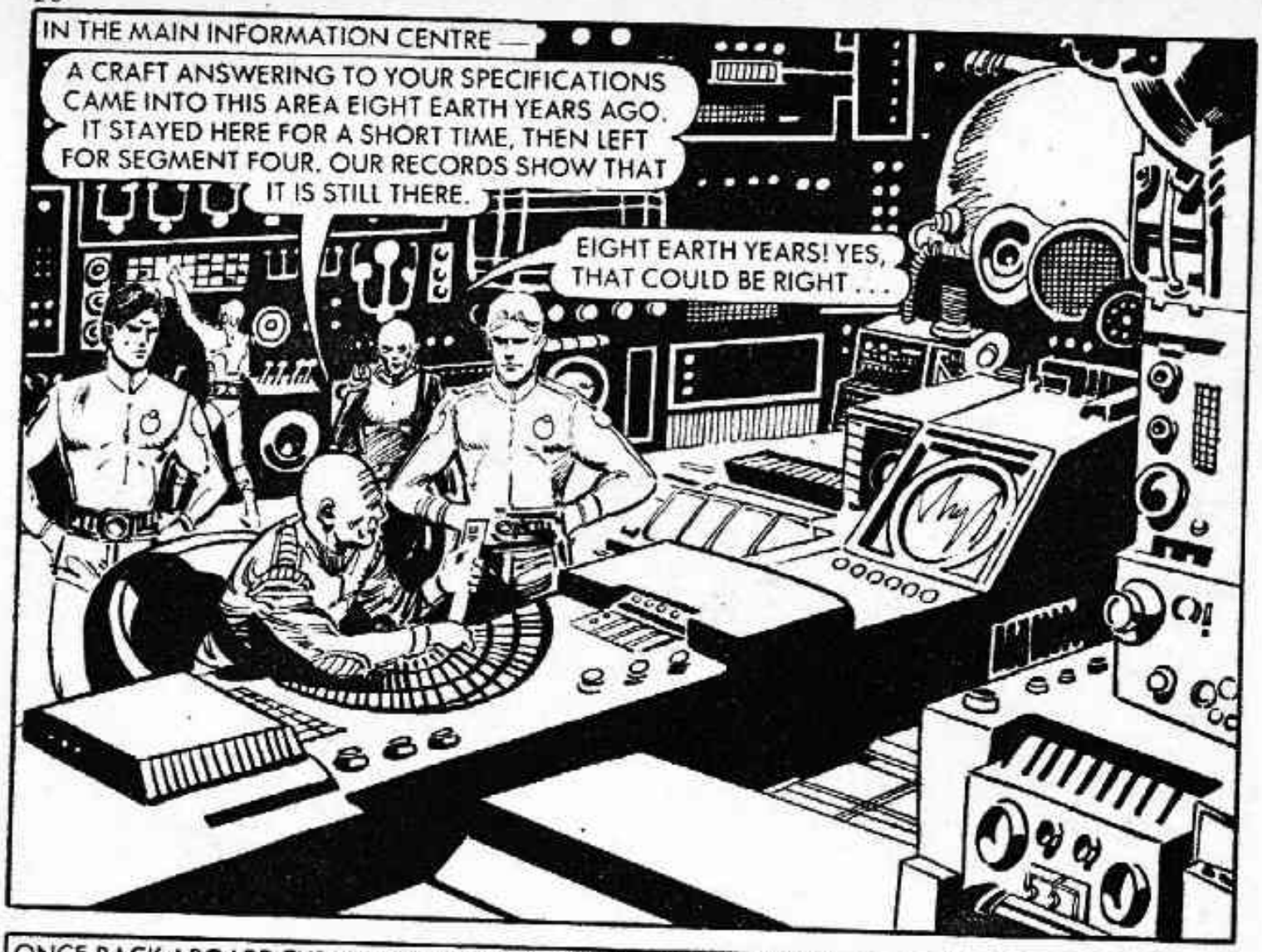


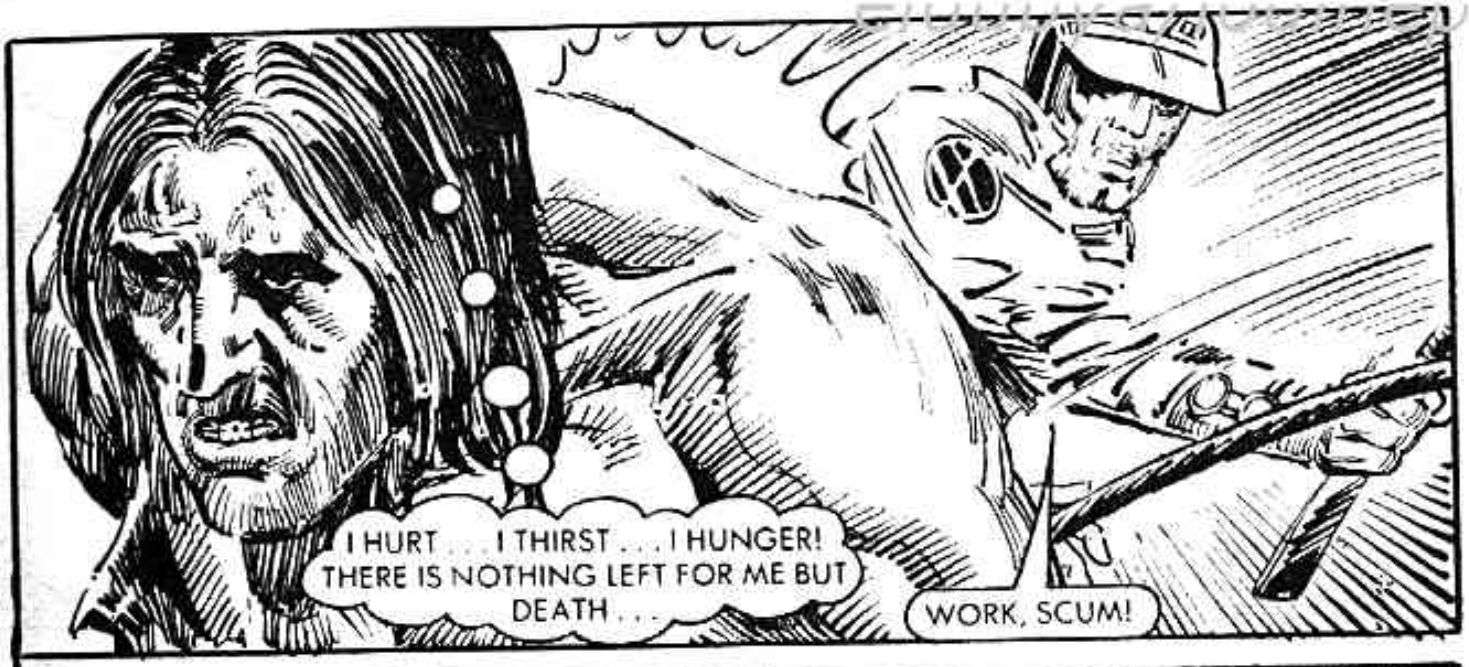



IN THE MAIN INFORMATION CENTRE —
A CRAFT ANSWERING TO YOUR SPECIFICATIONS CAME INTO THIS AREA EIGHT EARTH YEARS AGO. IT STAYED HERE FOR A SHORT TIME, THEN LEFT FOR SEGMENT FOUR. OUR RECORDS SHOW THAT IT IS STILL THERE.
EIGHT EARTH YEARS! YES, THAT COULD BE RIGHT . . .

ONCE BACK ABOARD THE GIANT ANTARES CRAFT —
WE WILL GO TO SEGMENT FOUR IMMEDIATELY. FAIL TO FIND JAL AND YOUR PLANET DIES.

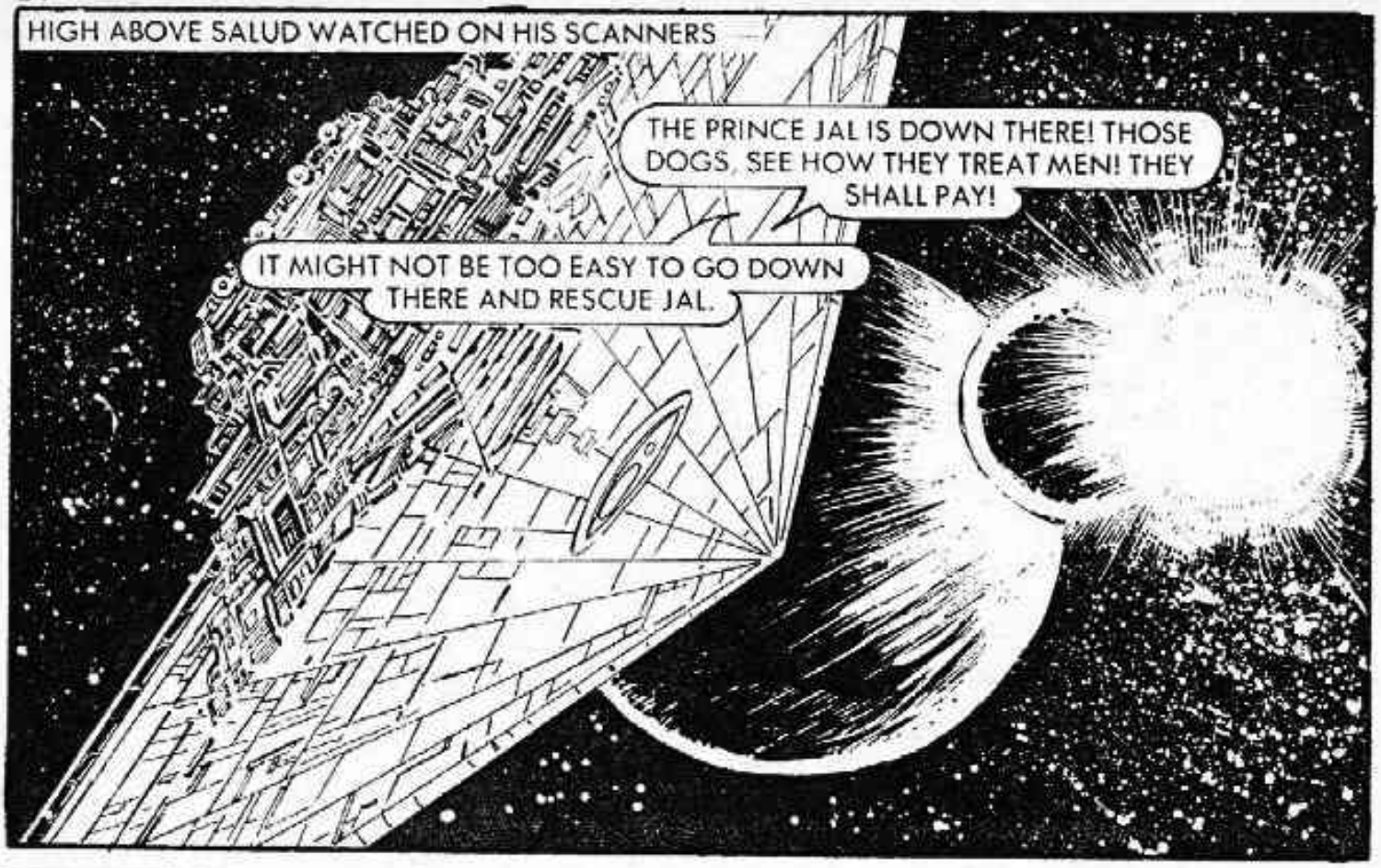
AS SALUD SENT HIS CRAFT HURTLING AWAY TOWARDS SEGMENT FOUR, A BUNCH OF SPACE MERCENARIES, MOORED TO THE ARCHIVISTS' SATELLITE, HAD BEEN SUMMONED THE MOMENT SALUD APPEARED ABOARD.
I RECOGNISED THE RACE. MEN, WITH STRANGE WHITE SKIN. THIS JAL . . . HE CAME HERE EIGHT YEARS AGO AND HAD THE ARROGANCE TO ATTACK THIS SATELLITE. HE PASSED CLOSE TO US AS HIGH SPEED. SOME OF OUR EQUIPMENT WAS DAMAGED BY THE AFTERBURN OF HIS CRAFT. AS YOU KNOW, TO HARM US IS AN OFFENCE OF THE HIGHEST ORDER — YOUR TASK IS TO PUNISH THEM.
ALL OF THEIR RACE? WHERE ARE THEY HEADED?
SEGMENT FOUR! IF ONE MEMBER OF THEIR RACE IS GUILTY, THEY ARE ALL GUILTY. I WANT YOU TO FOLLOW THEM AND WATCH. IF THEY RESCUE THIS JAL, YOU MUST GET HIM FROM THEIR HANDS AND RETURN HIM TO US FOR PUNISHMENT. IF NOT, BRING THEM BACK FOR PUNISHMENT.

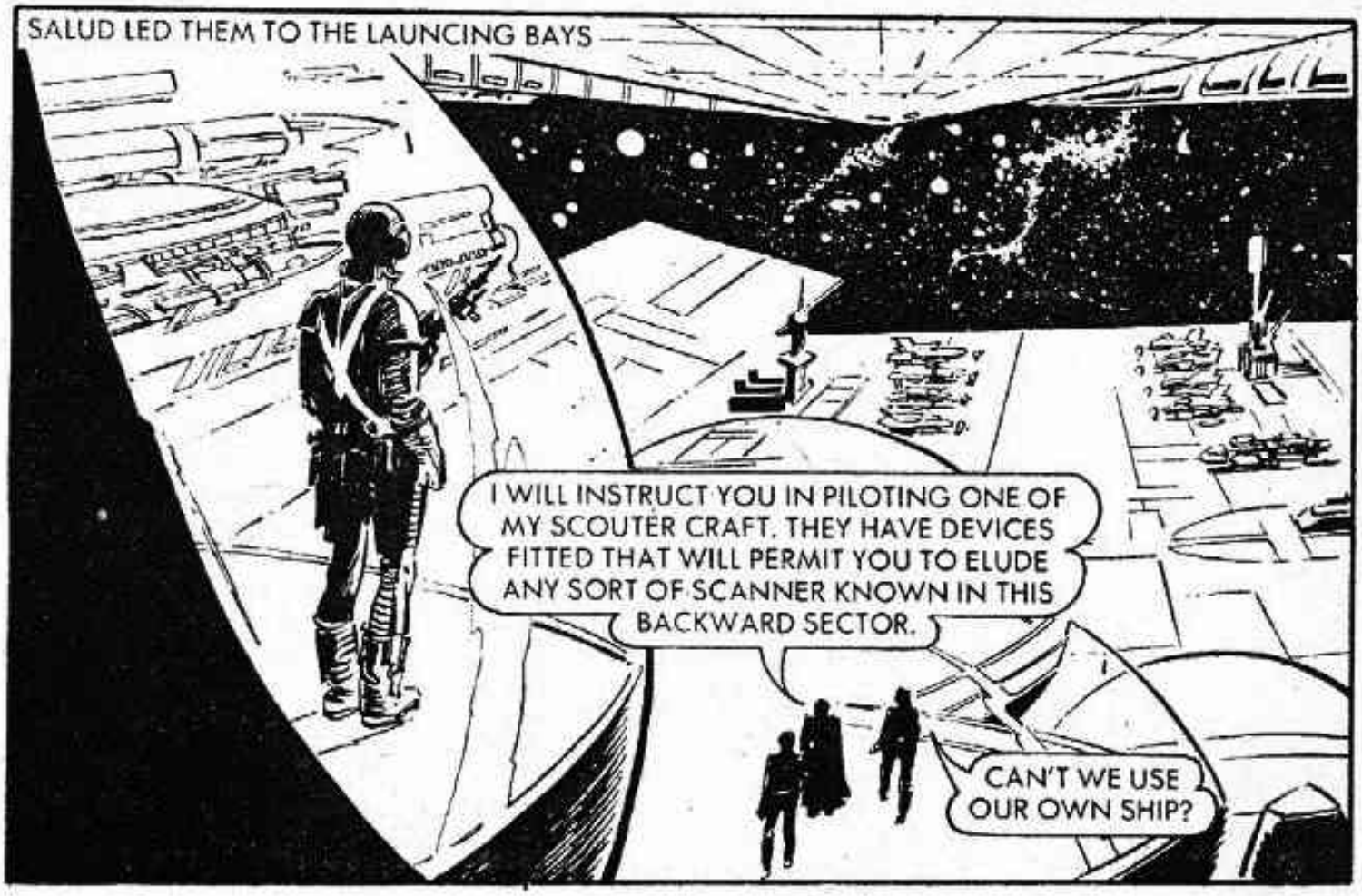
SEGMENT FOUR INCLUDED THE PLANETS KILINDINI AND SANSIBARR, TWO PLANETS BENEATH ONE SMALL SUN. RULED BY AN ARROGANT DESPOT, THESE WERE SLAVE PLANETS WHERE PEOPLE CPATURED FROM ALL OVER THE UNIVERSE WERE BROUGHT TO WORK IN A TECHNOLOGICALLY BACKWARD COUNTRY.
FAR BELOW, ON THE WORLD OF SANSIBARR, MEN OF THE MANY NATIONS STRUGGLED IN APALLING CONDITIONS.
I AM TOO ILL TO WORK MORE . . . I WILL DIE ON THIS TERRIBLE PLACE.

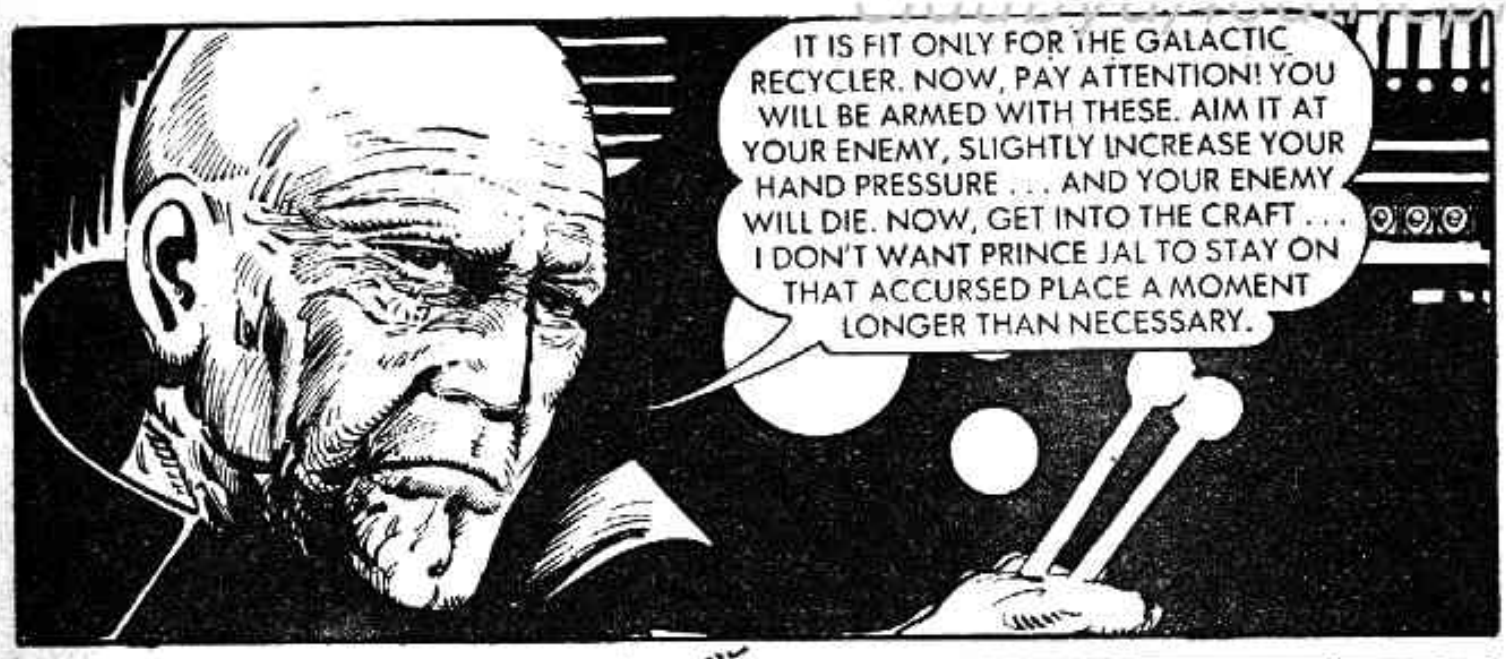

I HURT . . . I THIRST . . . I HUNGER! THERE IS NOTHING LEFT FOR ME BUT DEATH . . .
WORK, SCUM!

EVERY SLAVE WAS FITTED WITH A NECK RING, WHICH REMAINED INACTIVE AS LONG AS THE MAN STAYED ON HIS WORK PATH. BUT STRAY AND THE RING CRACKLED INTO ELECTRONIC LIFE, SEARING THE NERVES WITHIN HIS SPINAL COLUMN.
AAARGH!

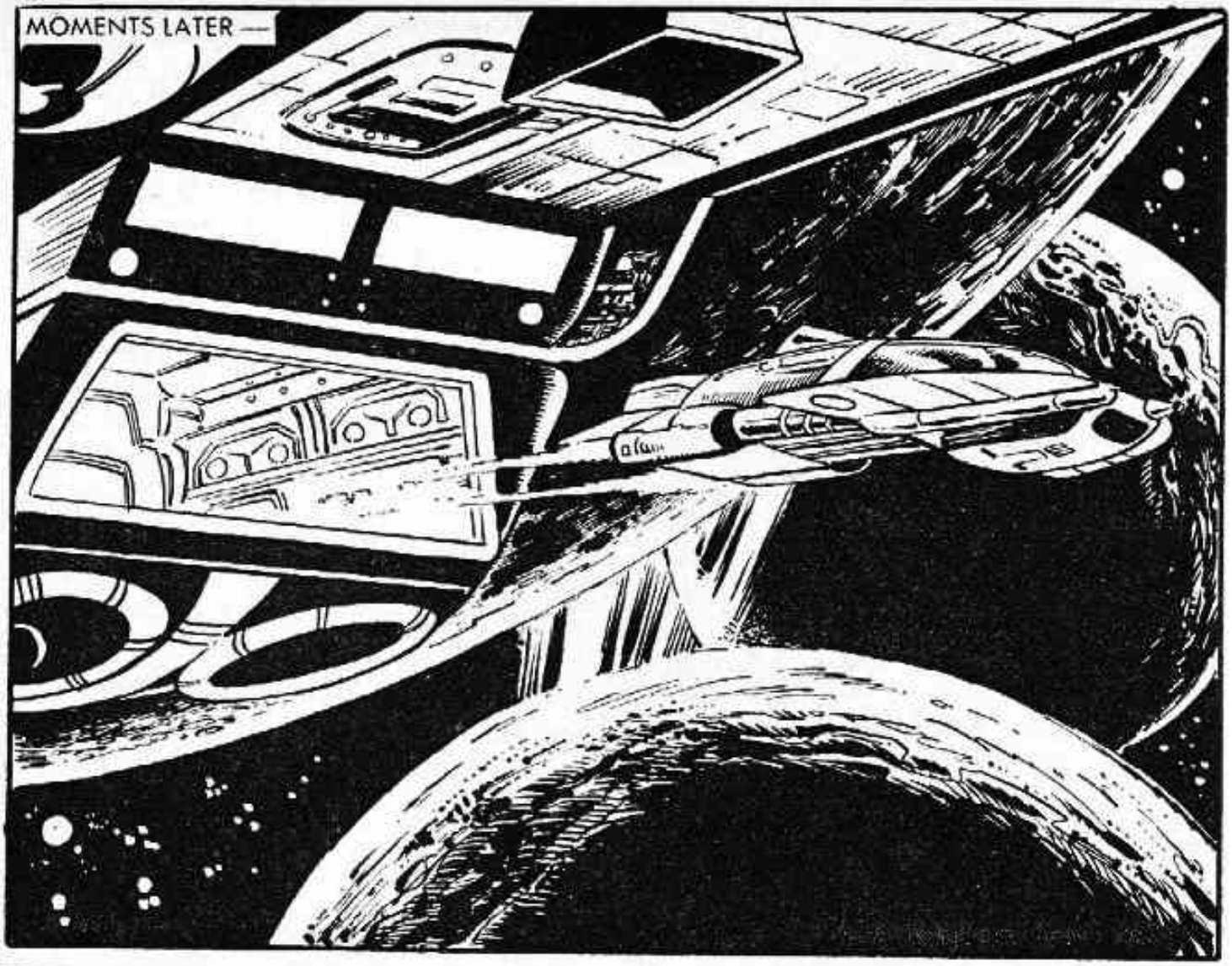
THE EMPEROR KEPT HIS SLAVES IN ABJECT FEAR —
THE DOGS ARE TOO SLOW! SPEED THEM UP!
IT SHALL BE DONE, EMPEROR!

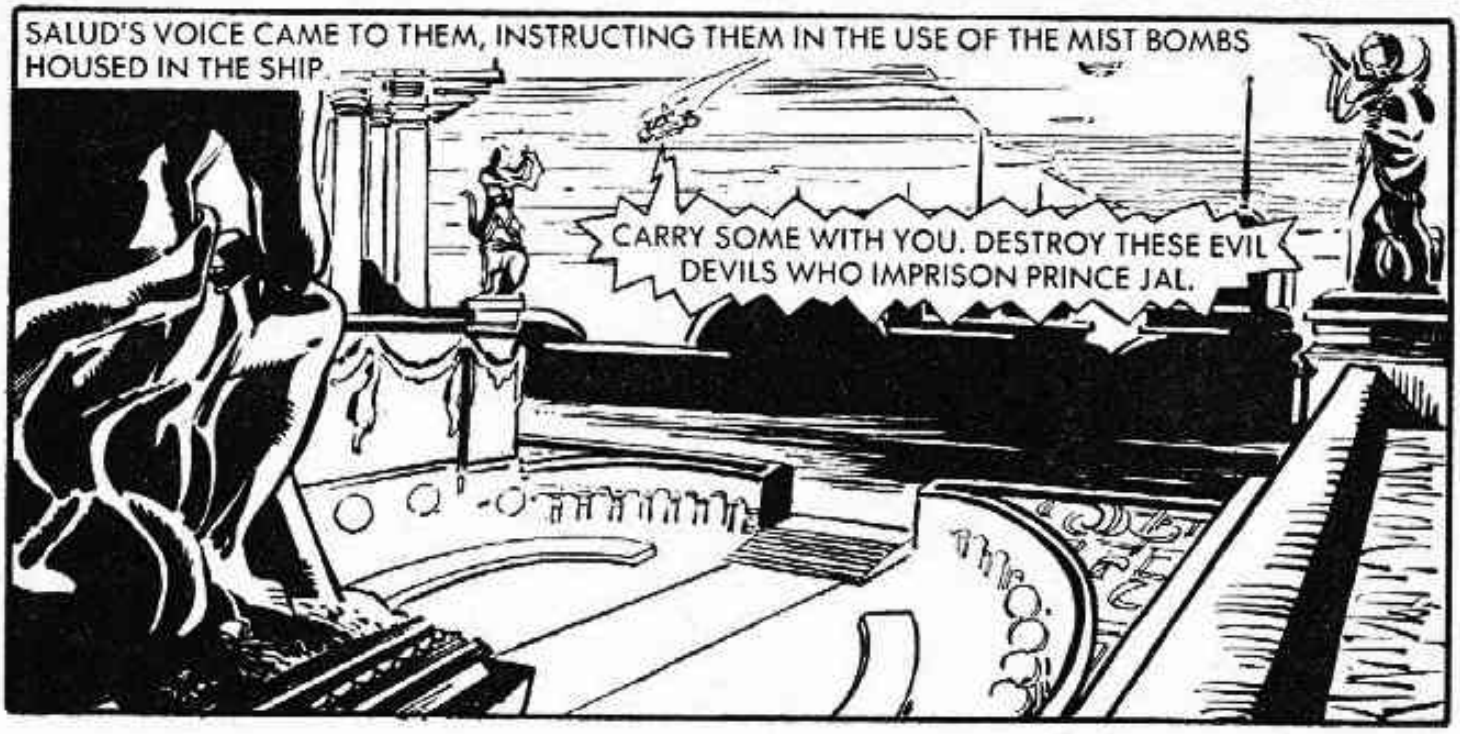

HIGH ABOVE SALUD WATCHED ON HIS SCANNERS
THE PRINCE JAL IS DOWN THERE! THOSE DOGS, SEE HOW THEY TREAT MEN! THEY SHALL PAY!
IT MIGHT NOT BE TOO EASY TO GO DOWN THERE AND RESCUE JAL.


SALUD LED THEM TO THE LAUNCING BAYS
I WILL INSTRUCT YOU IN PILOTING ONE OF MY SCOUTER CRAFT. THEY HAVE DEVICES FITTED THAT WILL PERMIT YOU TO ELUDE ANY SORT OF SCANNER KNOWN IN THIS BACKWARD SECTOR.
CAN'T WE USE OUR OWN SHIP?

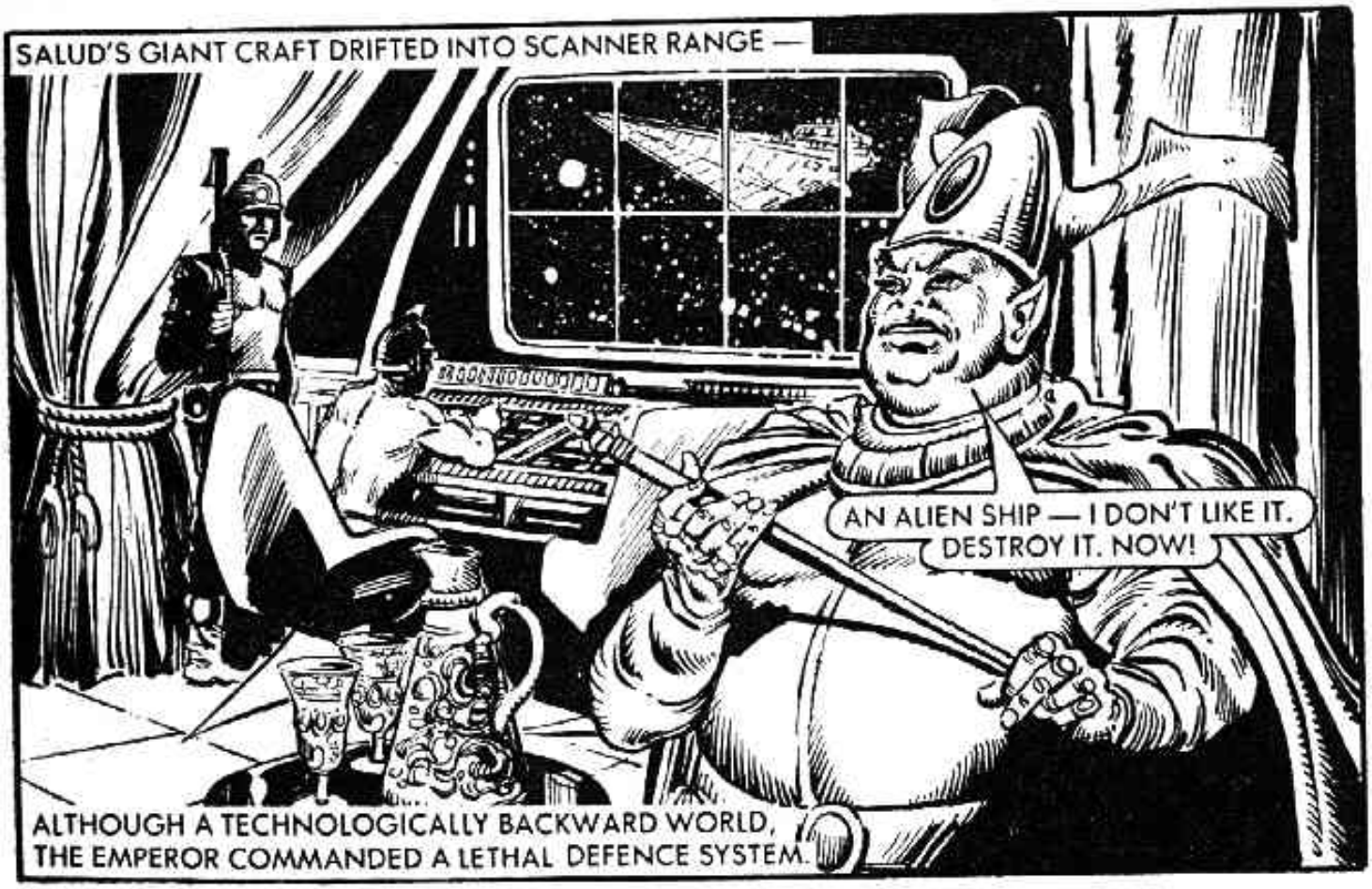

IT IS FIT ONLY FOR THE GALACTIC RECYCLER. NOW, PAY ATTENTION! YOU WILL BE ARMED WITH THESE. AIM IT AT YOUR ENEMY, SLIGHTLY INCREASE YOUR HAND PRESSURE . . . AND YOUR ENEMY WILL DIE. NOW, GET INTO THE CRAFT . . . I DON'T WANT PRINCE JAL TO STAY ON THAT ACCURSED PLACE A MOMENT LONGER THAN NECESSARY.

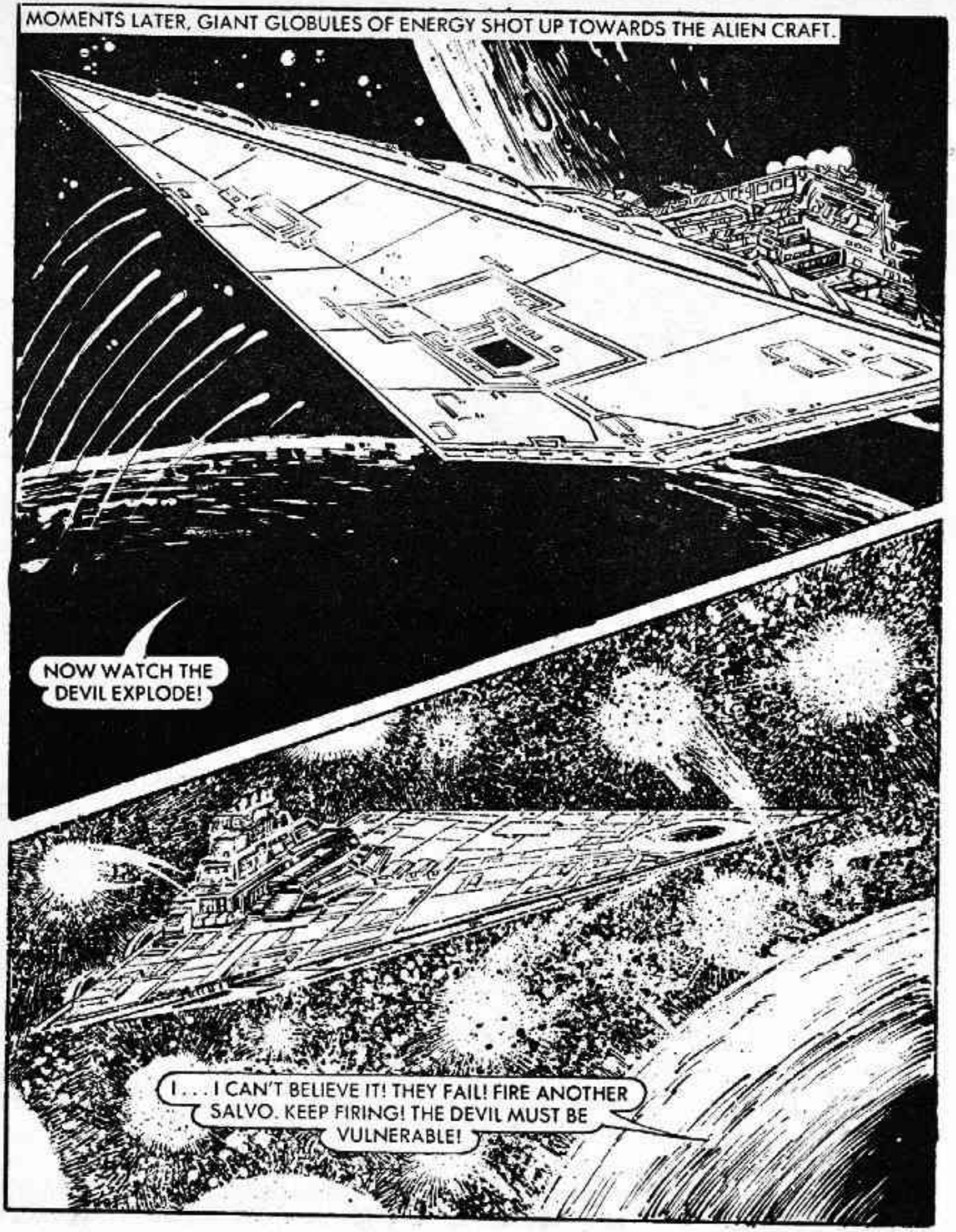
WHEN SALUD WAS SATISFIED THAT DANE COULD PILOT THE SHIP HE TURNED TO GO.
I SHALL CONTROL THE FLIGHT DOWN . . . I SUSPECT YOU PLAN TO ESCAPE WITH THIS SHIP. IMPOSSIBLE! I SHALL BE ON THE CONTROL DECK FOLLOWING THE ACTION. NOW, GO!


MOMENTS LATER —


SALUD'S VOICE CAME TO THEM, INSTRUCTING THEM IN THE USE OF THE MIST BOMBS HOUSED IN THE SHIP.
CARRY SOME WITH YOU. DESTROY THESE EVIL DEVILS WHO IMPRISON PRINCE JAL.

THEY LANDED SMOOTHLY —
YOU EVER SEEN SO MANY MASSIVE BUILDINGS?


SALUD'S GIANT CRAFT DRIFTED INTO SCANNER RANGE —
AN ALIEN SHIP — I DON'T LIKE IT. DESTROY IT. NOW!
ALTHOUGH A TECHNOLOGICALLY BACKWARD WORLD, THE EMPEROR COMMANDED A LETHAL DEFENCE SYSTEM.


MOMENTS LATER, GIANT GLOBULES OF ENERGY SHOT UP TOWARDS THE ALIEN CRAFT.
NOW WATCH THE DEVIL EXPLODE!
I . . . I CAN'T BELIEVE IT! THEY FAIL! FIRE ANOTHER SALVO. KEEP FIRING! THE DEVIL MUST BE VULNERABLE!

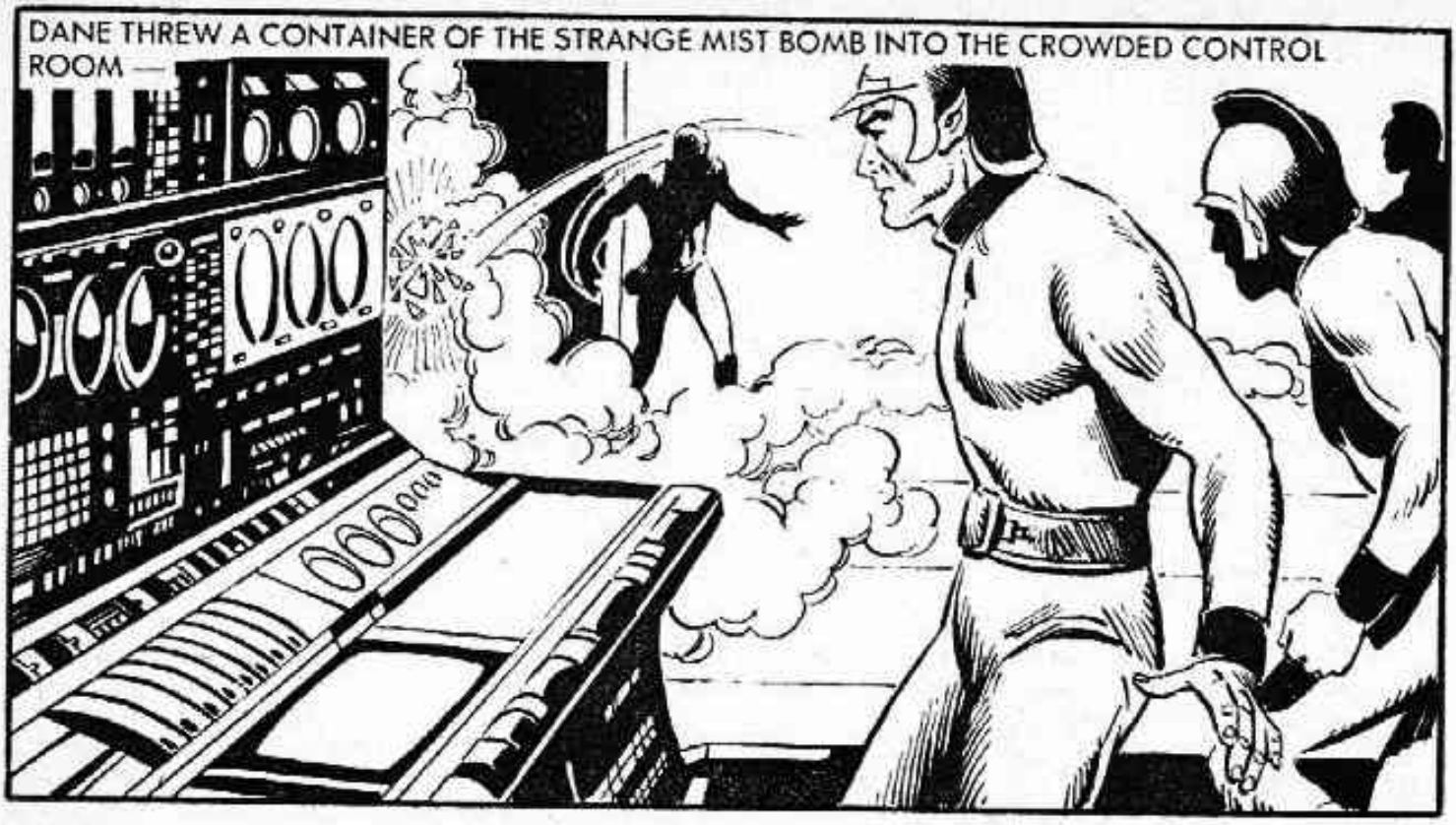
ON THE PLANET, DANE AND PRIL HAD FOUND JAL WITH A BIOSCANNER —
I'LL GRAB HIM . . . YOU WATCH THE GUARDS.
SALUD MENTIONED A COLLAR THAT GIVES OUT A KIND OF ELECTRONIC SIGNAL, REMEMBER?

THEN, AS THEY GOT TO THE PRINCE'S SIDE . . .
ENEMY!
I'LL HANDLE THEM, DANE. YOU GRAB JAL!

BUT WHEN HE ATTEMPTED TO PICK UP JAL —
I'LL HAVE TO SMASH THE CENTRAL CONTROL FOR IT, JAL . . . YOU STAY HERE!
PRIL HELD OFF THE GUARDS —
I . . . I . . .

THE OTHER GUARDS BACKED OFF, BEWILDERED BY THIS NEW WEAPON.

DANE, MEANTIME, RACED TOWARDS SLAVE RING CONTROL.


DANE THREW A CONTAINER OF THE STRANGE MIST BOMB INTO THE CROWDED CONTROL ROOM —

THE DEADLY MIST WAS ATTRACTED BY BODY HEAT —
IT'S A NERVE GAS — WHAT ELSE DOES IT DO?
HE HAD HIS ANSWER IN THE VERY NEXT SECOND.

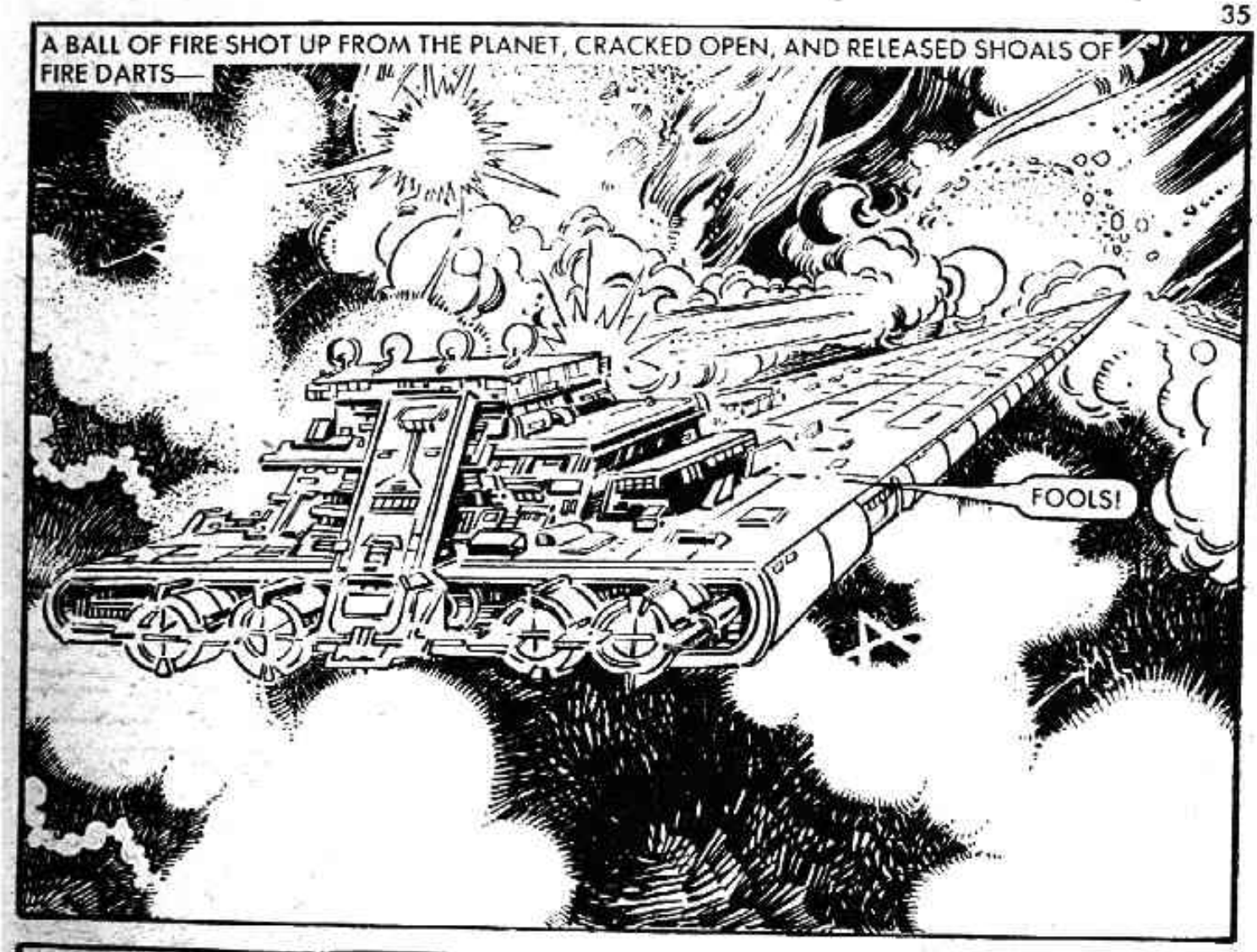
DISAPPEARED! SALUD SAID THAT WAS ONLY THE PORTABLE VERSION OF THE BOMB! WHAT DO THE REALLY BIG ONES DO?

USING HIS FIRE-STICK, HE TOTALLY DESTROYED THE CONTROL BOARD.
NOW TO GET JAL TO THE SHIP. JUST HOPE PRIL'S COPING.

OUTSIDE —
DANE, LEND A HAND HERE! SOME OF THESE GUARDS TAKE A LOT OF PERSUADING!
I'LL CARRY JAL . . . GIVE ME COVERING FIRE.

KEEP GOING, DANE, I'VE GOT THESE GUARDS RATTLED!

MEANTIME, THE EMPEROR WATCHED IN SHOCKED DISBELIEF AS FIRST HIS GLOBULES, THEN HIS DANCERS, FAILED UTTERLY TO INFLICT THE SLIGHTEST DAMAGE ON SALUD'S HOVERING CRAFT.
IT ISN'T POSSIBLE! FIRE AGAIN AND AGAIN . . .

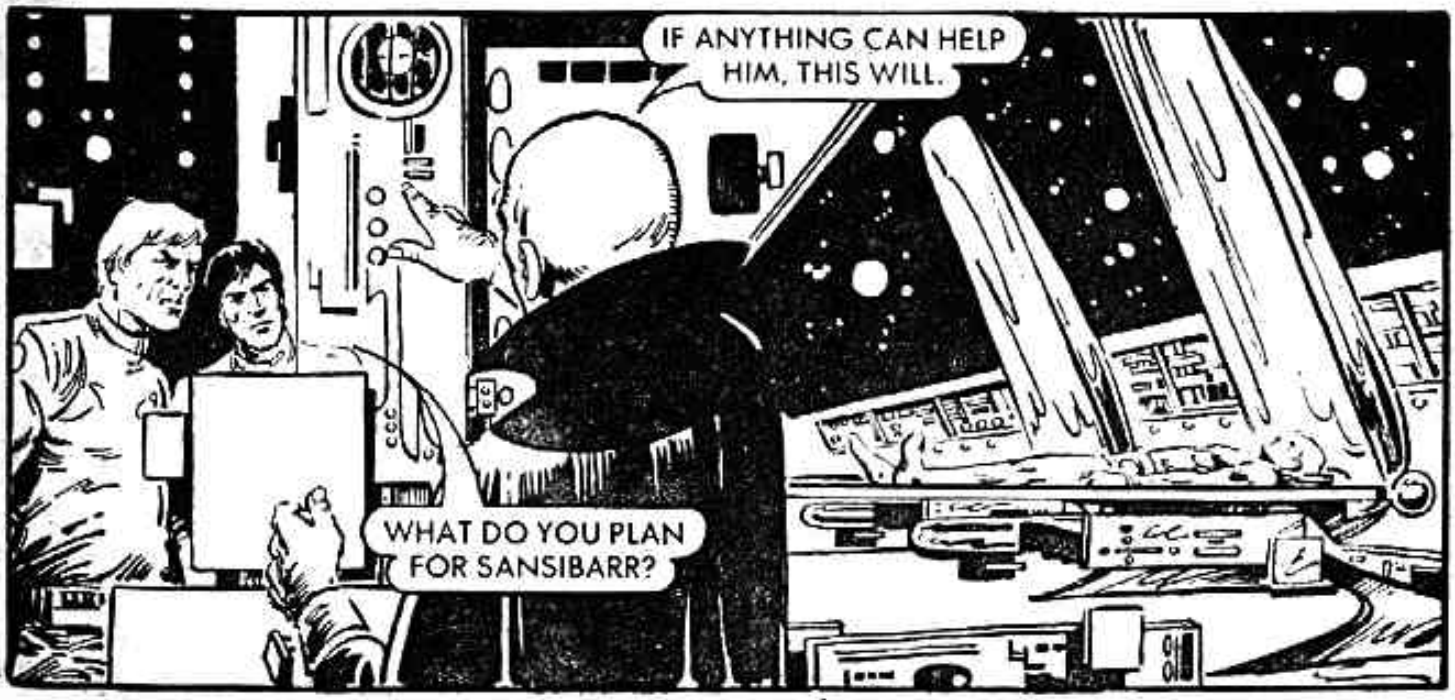

A BALL OF FIRE SHOT UP FROM THE PLANET, CRACKED OPEN, AND RELEASED SHOALS OF FIRE DARTS—
FOOLS!

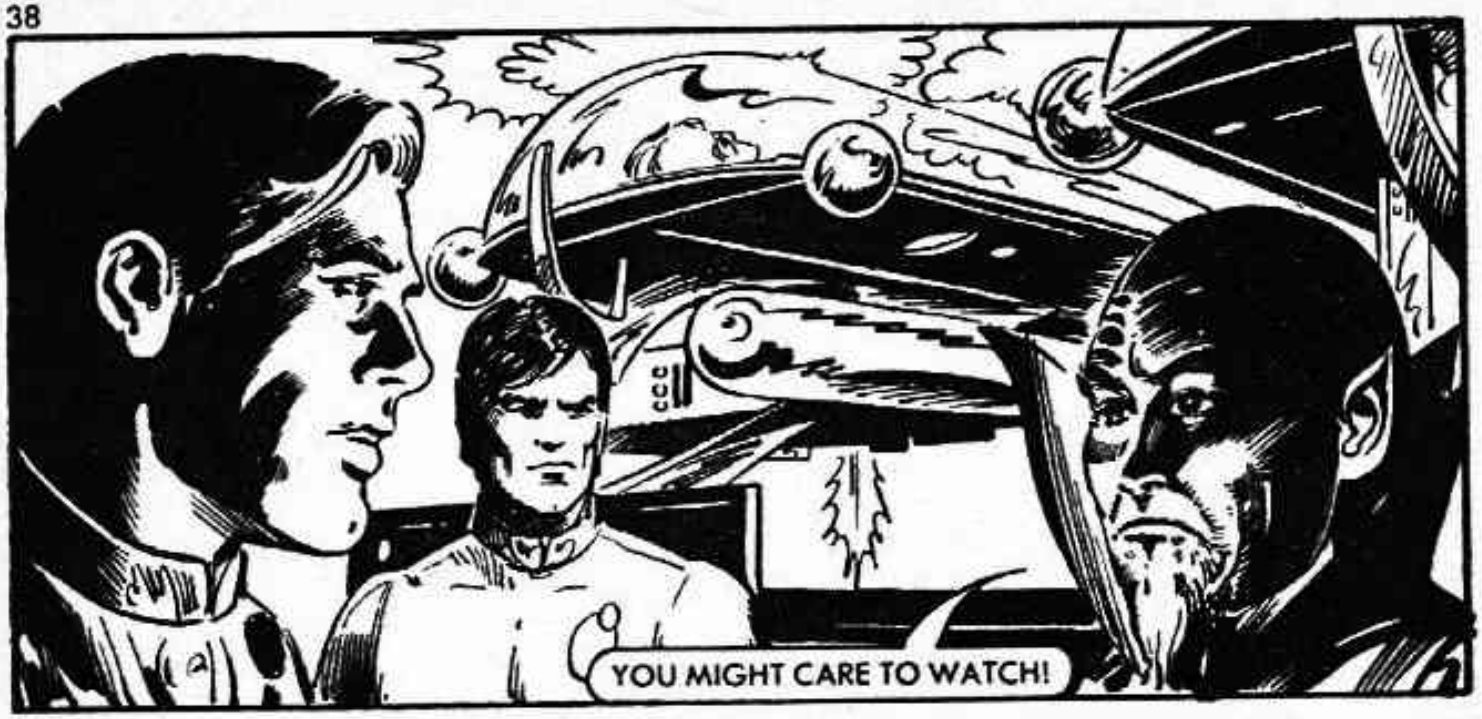
ON THE PLANET, DANE, PRIL AND JAL HAD REACHED THEIR CRAFT—
A COUPLE MORE OF THESE, THEN WE'LL GET OUT OF HERE.

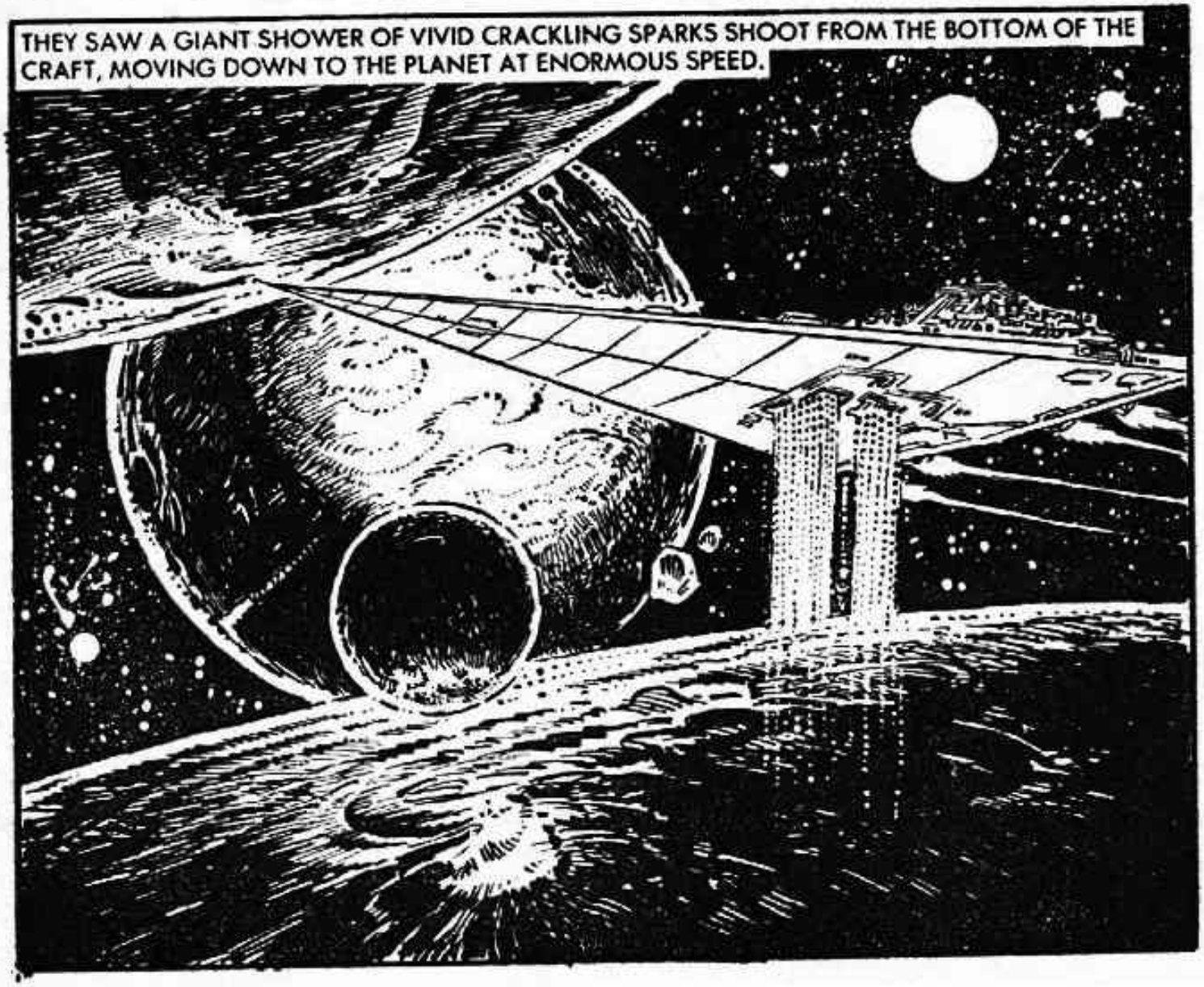
AS THE EARTHMEN DARTED INTO THEIR CRAFT—

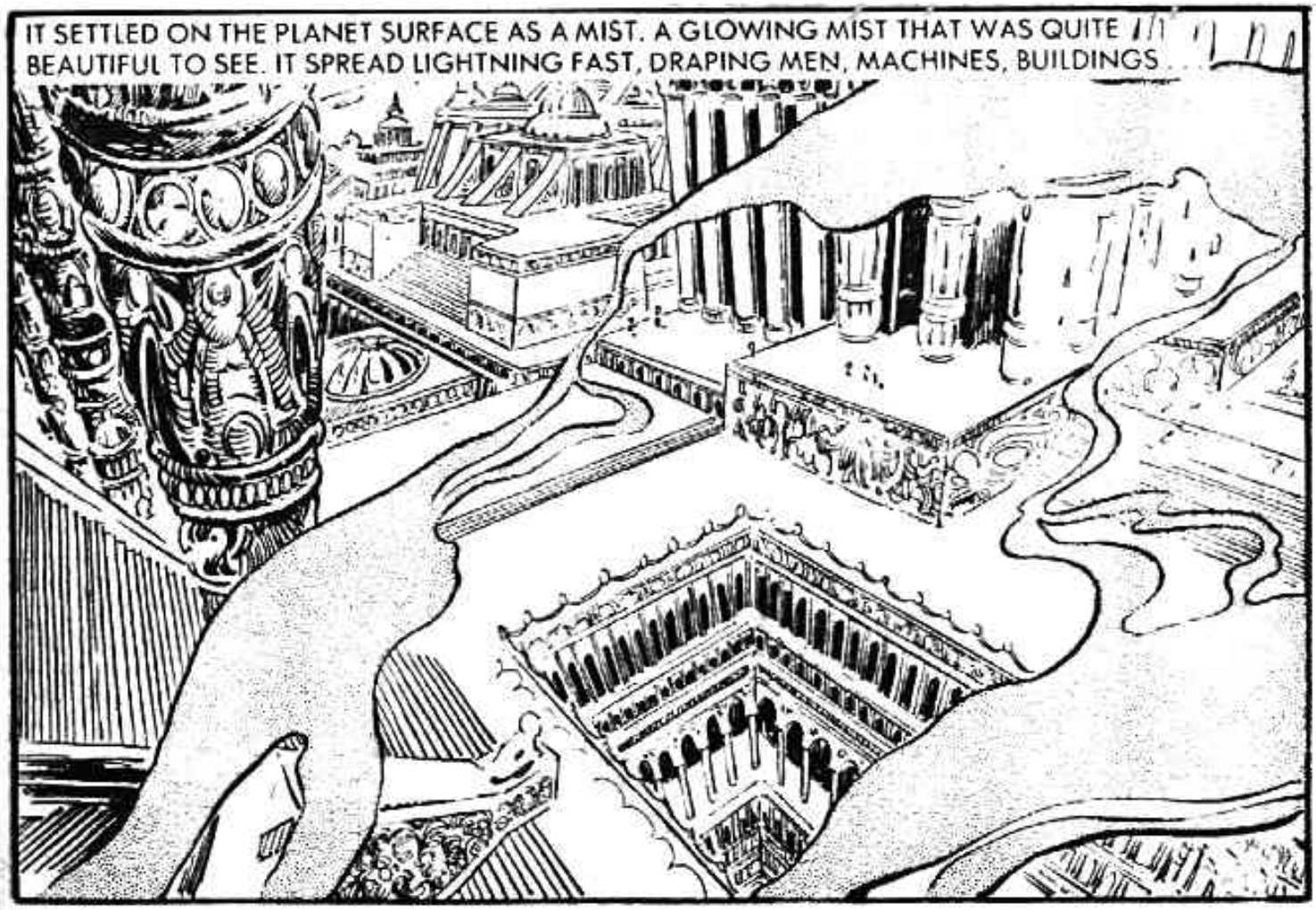
THEY BLASTED OFF—

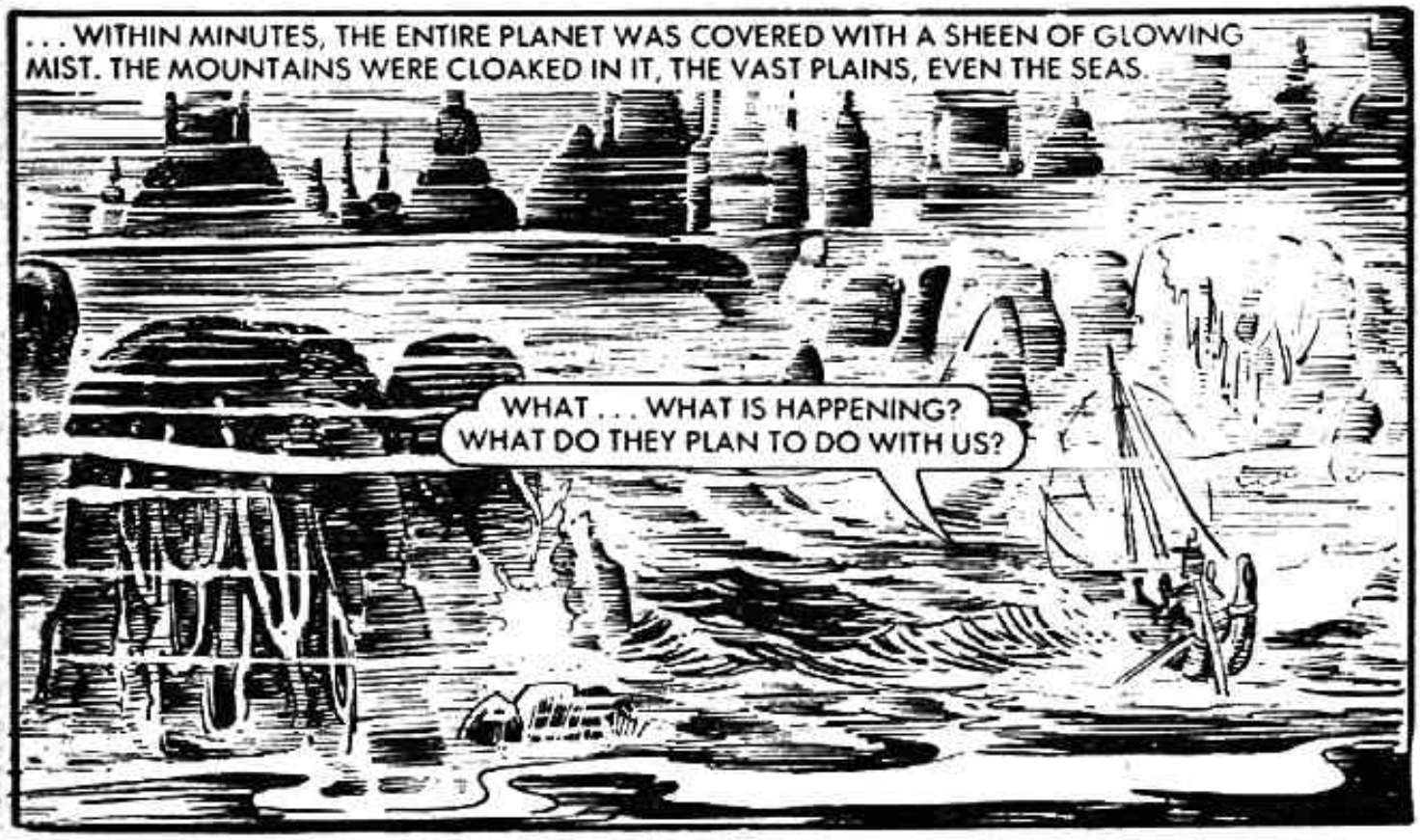
THEY DOCKED AND CARRIED THE STILL-SENSELESS JAL TO SALUD'S CONTROL ROOM.
HOW IS HE?
NOT GOOD!


IF ANYTHING CAN HELP HIM, THIS WILL.
WHAT DO YOU PLAN FOR SANSIBARR?


YOU MIGHT CARE TO WATCH!

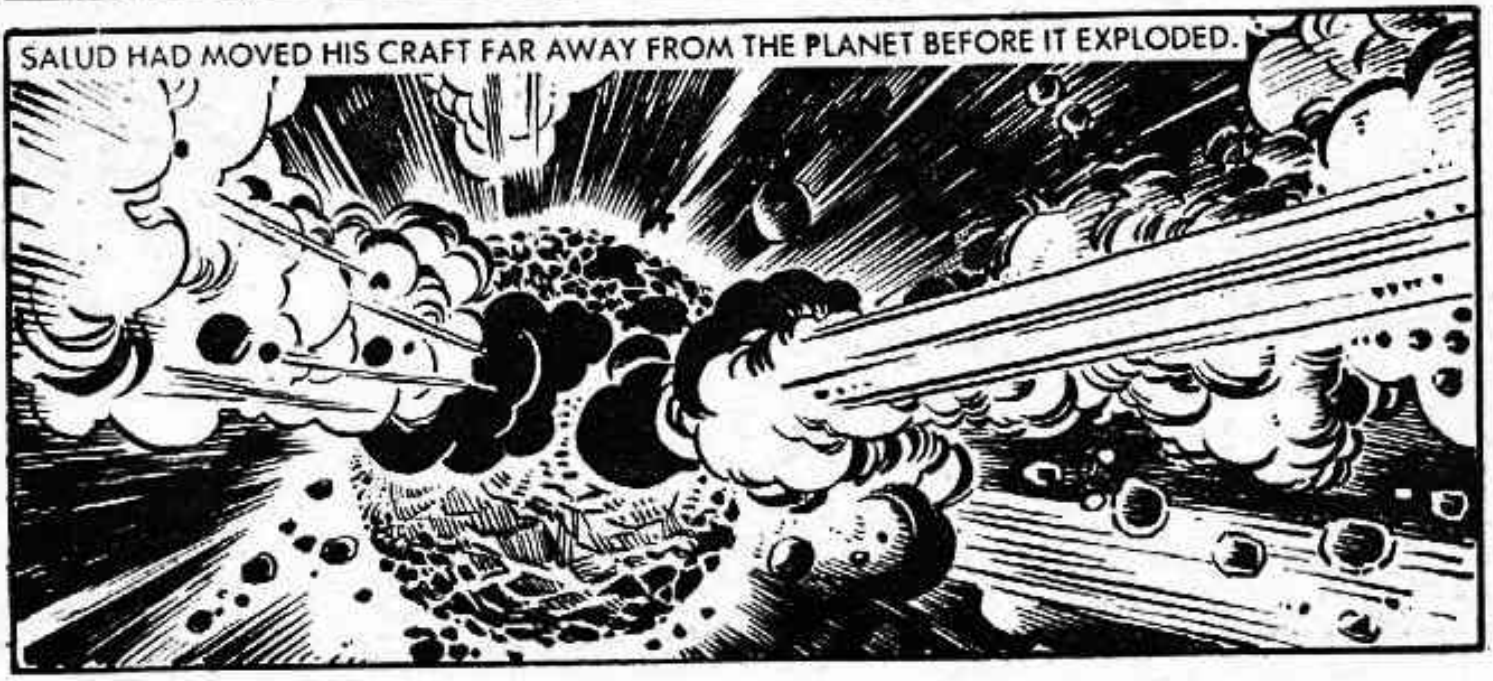

THEY SAW A GIANT SHOWER OF VIVID CRACKLING SPARKS SHOOT FROM THE BOTTOM OF THE CRAFT, MOVING DOWN TO THE PLANET AT ENORMOUS SPEED.


IT SETTLED ON THE PLANET SURFACE AS A MIST. A GLOWING MIST THAT WAS QUITE BEAUTIFUL TO SEE. IT SPREAD LIGHTNING FAST, DRAPING MEN, MACHINES, BUILDINGS . . .

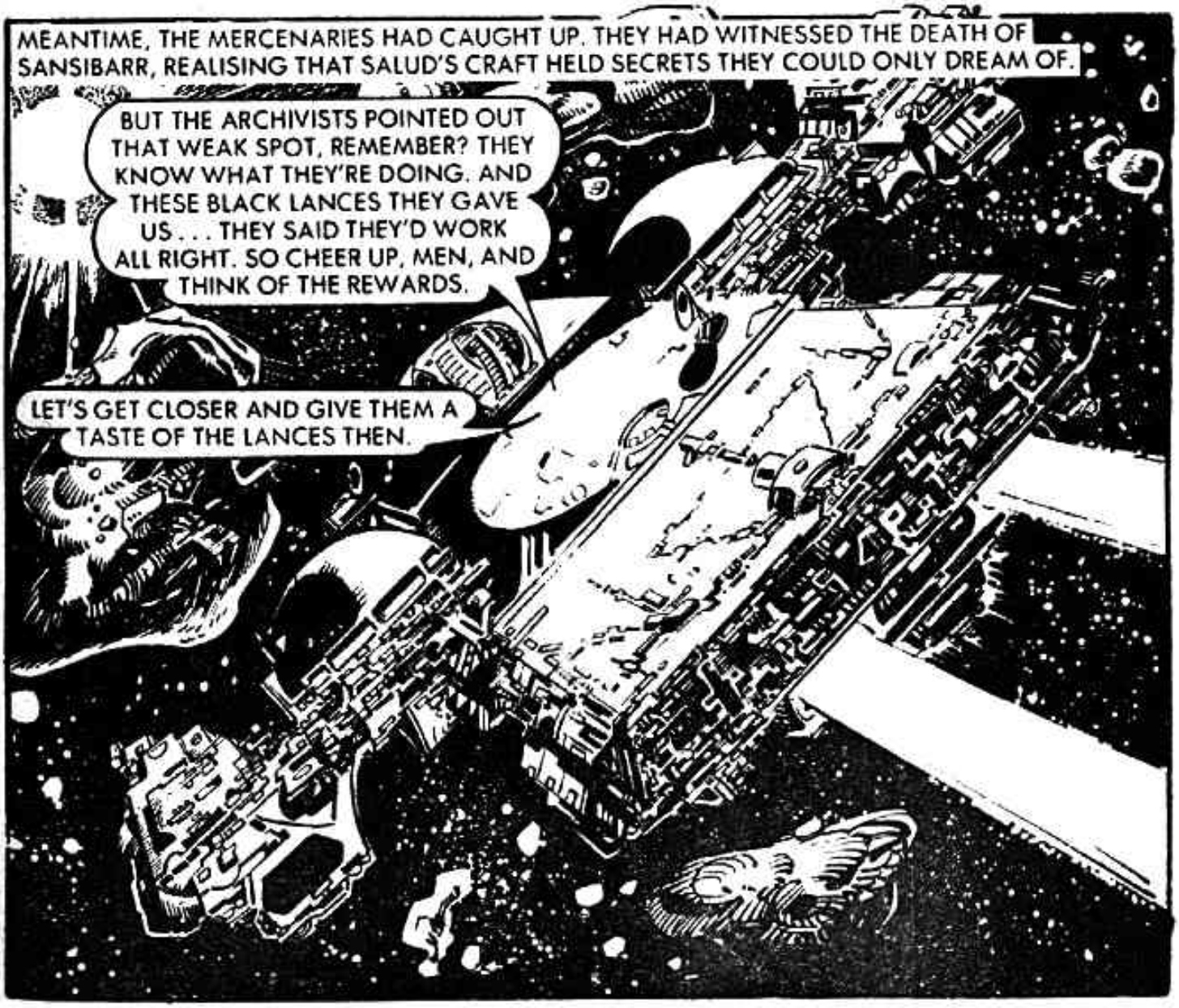

. . . WITHIN MINUTES, THE ENTIRE PLANET WAS COVERED WITH A SHEEN OF GLOWING MIST. THE MOUNTAINS WERE CLOAKED IN IT, THE VAST PLAINS, EVEN THE SEAS.
WHAT . . . WHAT IS HAPPENING? WHAT DO THEY PLAN TO DO WITH US?

CALL THEM . . . THERE MAY BE TIME TO PARLEY! CALL THEM, I SAY!
BUT NOBODY MOVED TO OBEY FOR EVERY MAN WAS ROOTED TO THE SPOT, HELD TIGHT BY THE SHINING FOG, POWERLESS TO DO ANYTHING BUT WAIT.

SECONDS LATER . . .

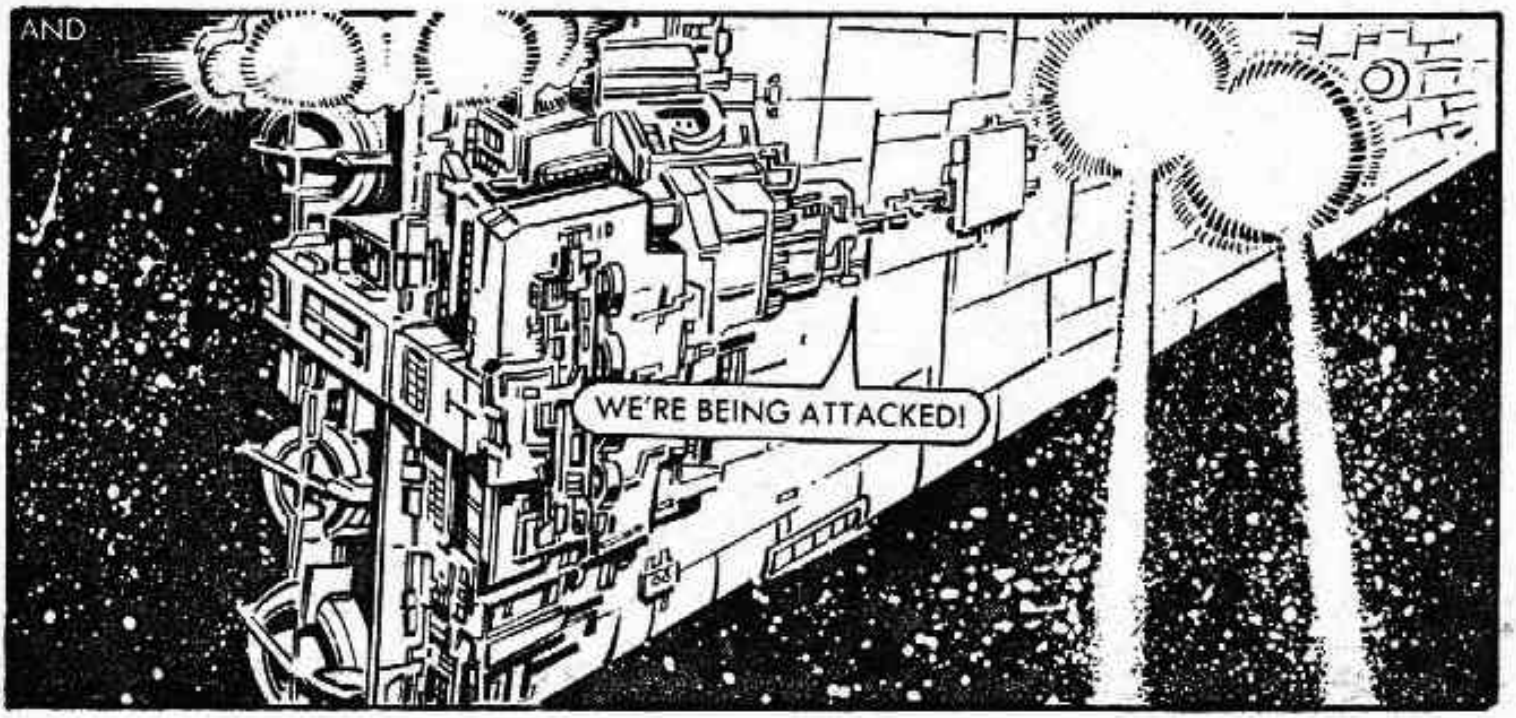

SALUD HAD MOVED HIS CRAFT FAR AWAY FROM THE PLANET BEFORE IT EXPLODED.

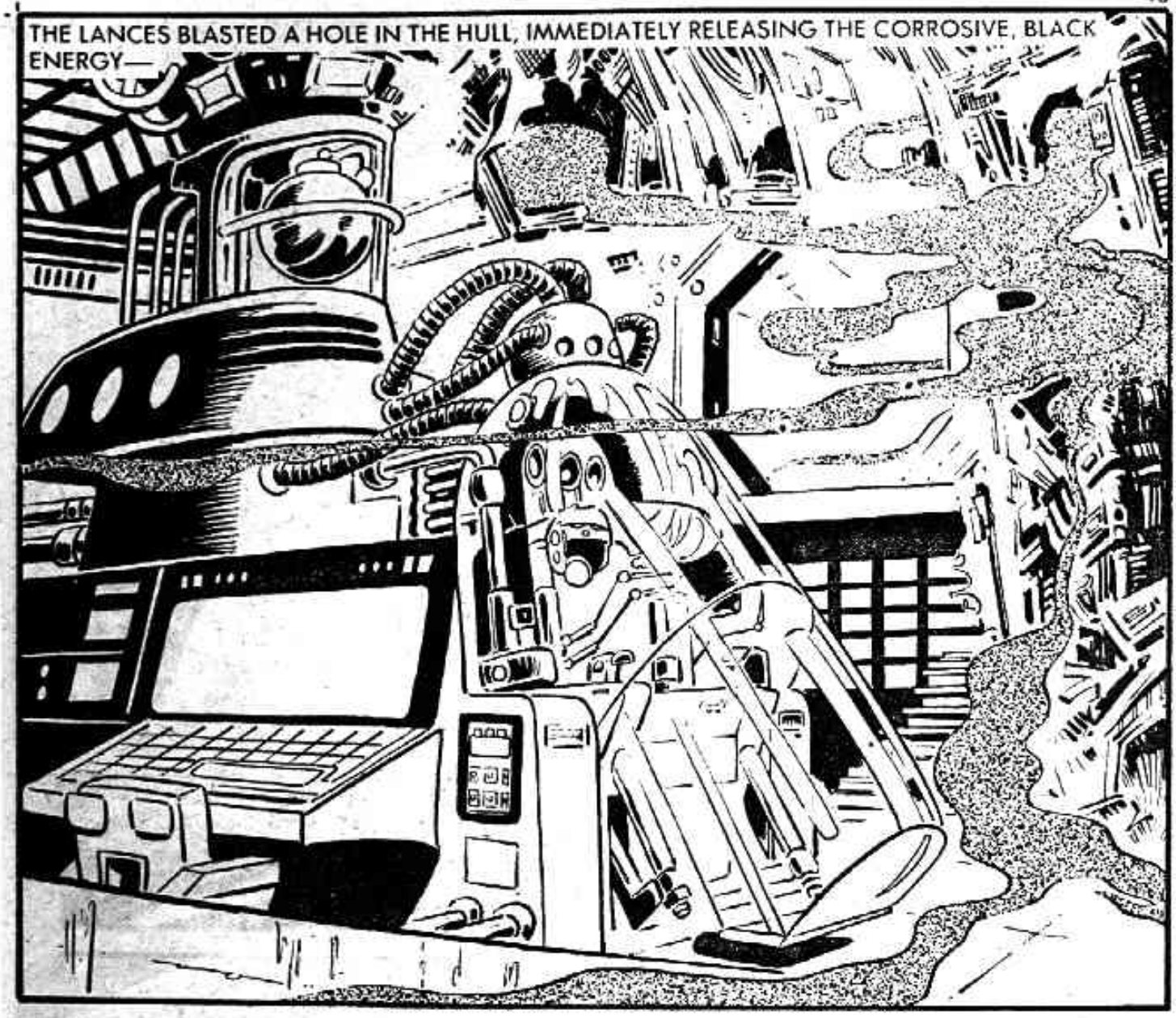
IT IS NOT WORKING . . . I FEAR JAL IS GONE.


MEANTIME, THE MERCENARIES HAD CAUGHT UP. THEY HAD WITNESSED THE DEATH OF SANSIBARR, REALISING THAT SALUD'S CRAFT HELD SECRETS THEY COULD ONLY DREAM OF.
BUT THE ARCHIVISTS POINTED OUT THAT WEAK SPOT, REMEMBER? THEY KNOW WHAT THEY'RE DOING. AND THESE BLACK LANCES THEY GAVE US . . . THEY SAID THEY'D WORK ALL RIGHT. SO CHEER UP, MEN, AND THINK OF THE REWARDS.
LET'S GET CLOSER AND GIVE THEM A TASTE OF THE LANCES THEN.

THE WEAK SPOT ON SALUD'S HULL WAS PIN-POINTED.
READY . . . READY . . . FIRE!

FOUR SAVAGE LANCES WERE FLUNG FROM THE CRAFT. AS THEY NEARED THE TARGET, THEY MOVED TOGETHER—


AND
WE'RE BEING ATTACKED!


THE LANCES BLASTED A HOLE IN THE HULL, IMMEDIATELY RELEASING THE CORROSIVE, BLACK ENERGY—

ON THE CONTROL DECK—
CAN'T YOU ISOLATE IT!
BE SILENT! I WANT TO OBSERVE BEFORE I ACT TO DESTROY WHATEVER HAS COME ABOARD.

BUT DANE WASN'T ABOUT TO WAIT FOR ANYTHING.
LET'S TAKE A LOOK! WE'VE STILL GOT OUR FIRESTICKS.

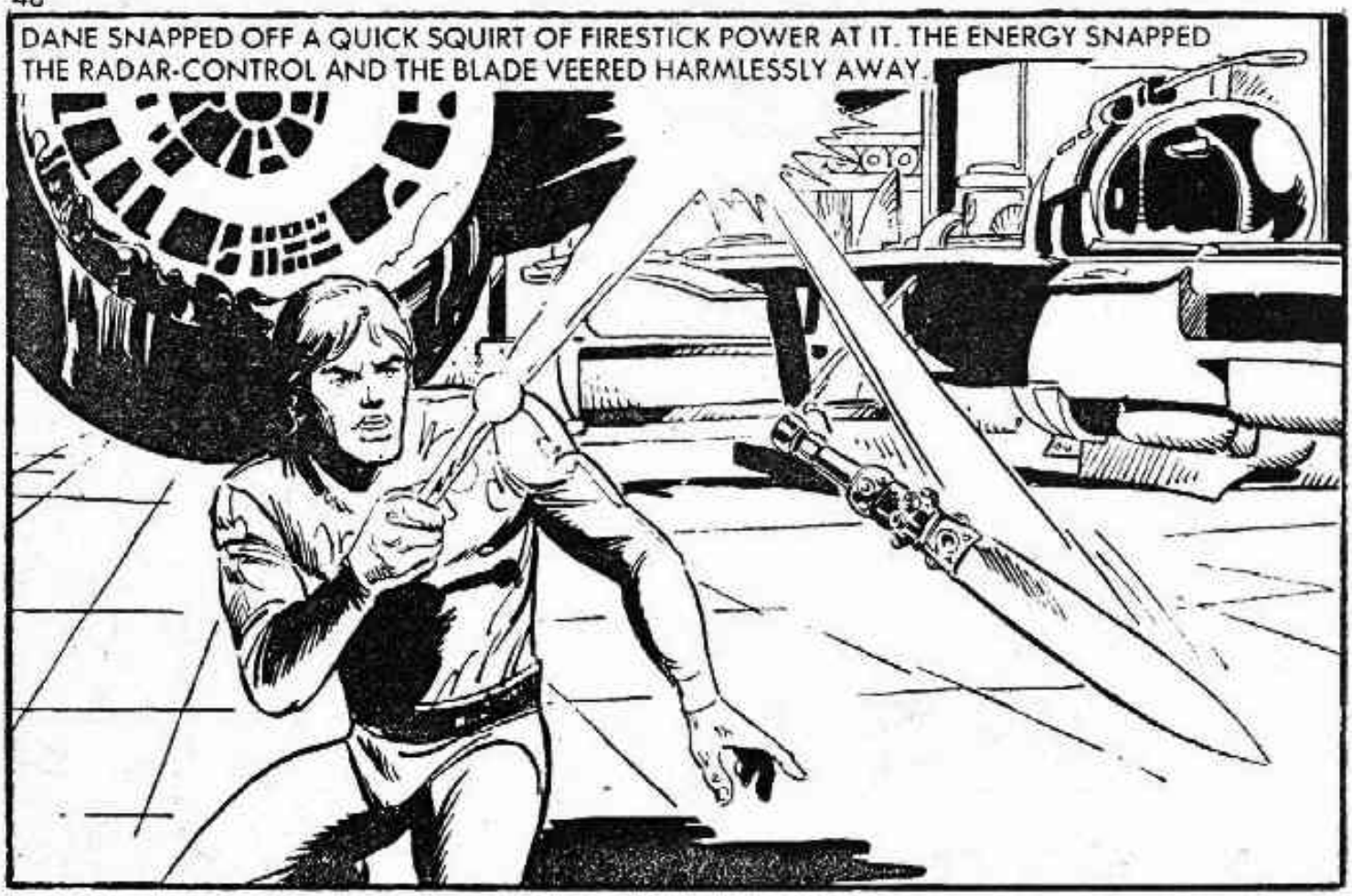
SECONDS LATER, A TINY STREAMER OF BLACK ENERGY DRIFTED INTO THE CONTROL ROOM THROUGH AN AIR CONDUIT—
I...I...

THE MERCENARIES HAD FOLLOWED UP QUICKLY. THEY MOORED THEIR SHIP NEXT TO THE GAPING HOLE IN SALUD'S CRAFT, AND, WEARING SPECIAL BREATHING MASKS, RACED INSIDE THE ALIEN SHIP.
TO THE CONTROL ROOM! VERIK . . . TAKE MEN TO THE LOWEST LEVEL, WORK YOUR WAY TO THE TOP. KILL EVERYTHING THAT MOVES . . . EXCEPT JAL!
MEANTIME, DANE AND PRIL REACHED THE LAUNCHING BAY.
OUR SHIP'S GONE!

SUDDENLY . . .
THERE'S JAL! SEIZE HIM!
THEY WERE DECEIVED BY DANE'S STRIKING LIKENESS TO THE PRINCE.

GRAB HIM! KILL THE OTHER!

A NET ENVELOPED PRIL—
DANE, I . . . I . . .
LET ME FINISH THEM OFF, THEN I'LL FREE YOU.
A DAGGER WAS FLUNG AT DANE, NOT TO KILL HIM, BUT TO WOUND HIM—RADAR-GUIDED, IT WAS BOUND TO STRIKE ITS TARGET EXACTLY WHERE THE THROWER INTENDED.


DANE SNAPPED OFF A QUICK SQUIRT OF FIRESTICK POWER AT IT. THE ENERGY SNAPPED THE RADAR-CONTROL AND THE BLADE VEERED HARMLESSLY AWAY.

DANE SWEPT THE RUSHING MERCENARIES WITH HIS WEAPON. MOMENTS LATER, ALL THE CUT-THROATS HAD VANISHED IN A SERIES OF SHATTERING EXPLOSIONS.

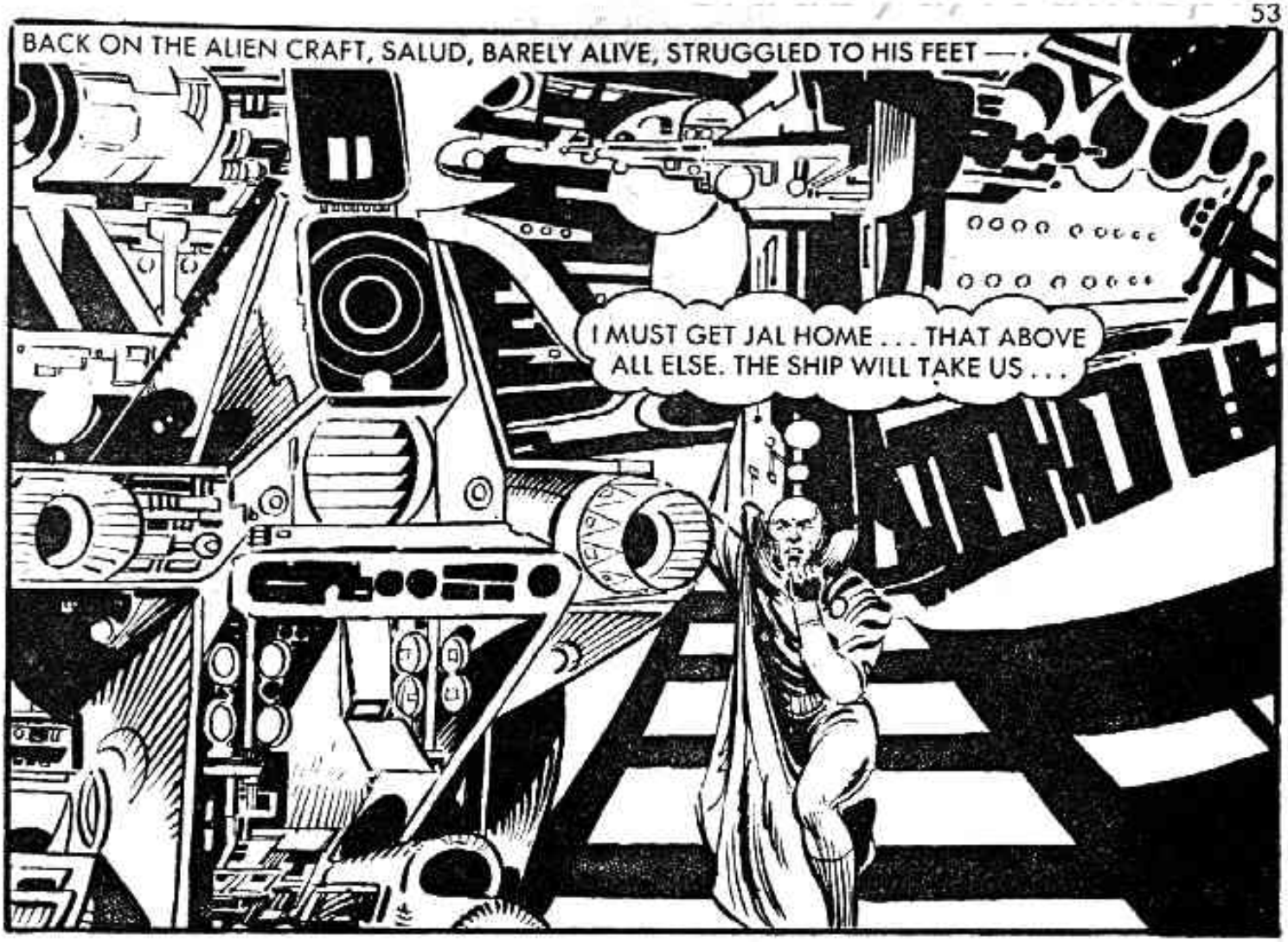
YOU OKAY?
I HURT ALL OVER . . .

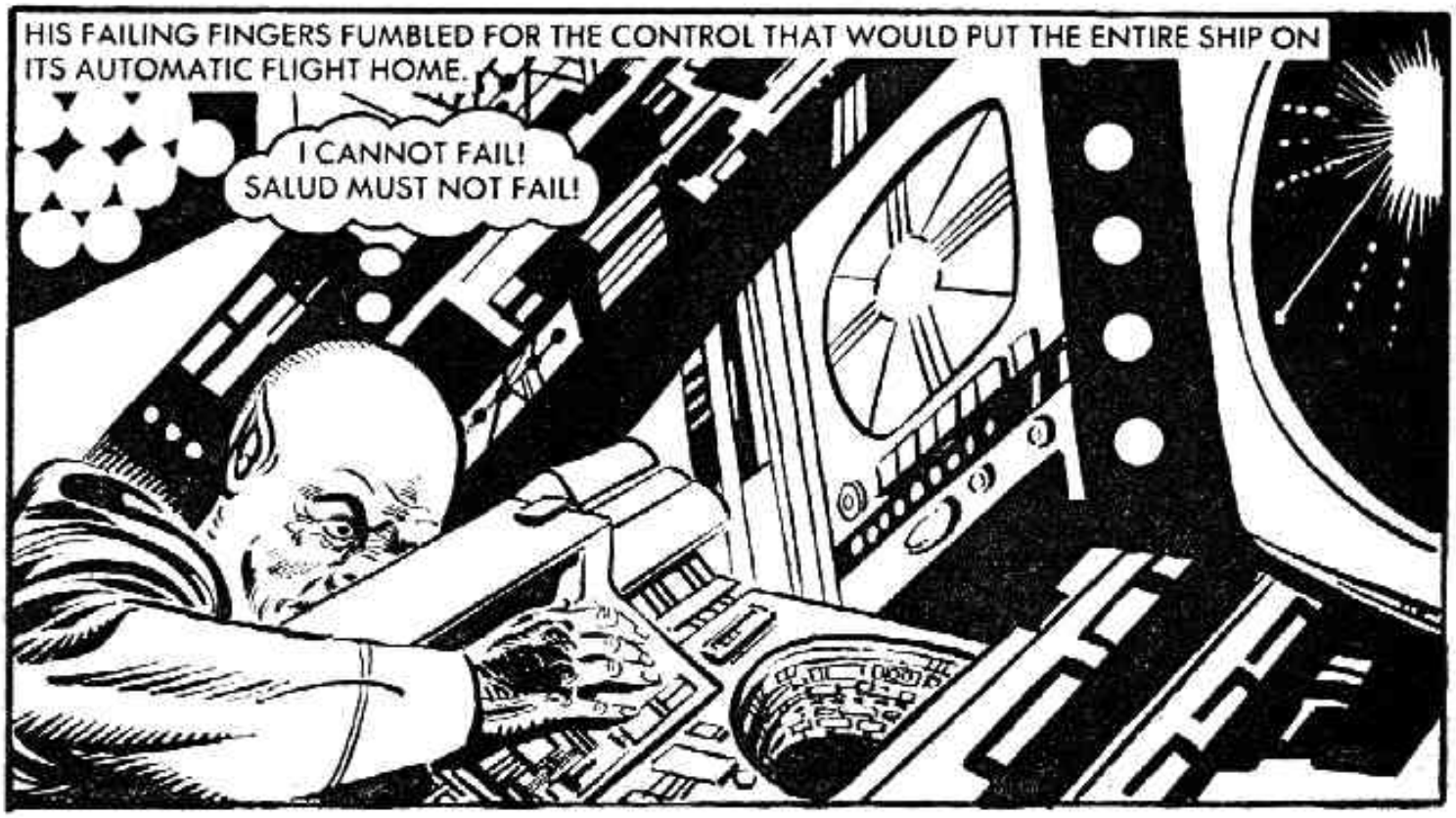
THEY PUT ON BREATHING MASKS—
SALUD NEVER INTENDED US TO GET FREE, DANE.
I'LL SWITCH ON A VIDEO SCREEN, IT'S BOUND TO BE TUNED TO THE CONTROL DECK. NO KNOWING HOW MANY MERCENARIES THERE ARE BETWEEN US AND SALUD.

WHEN DANE SWITCHED ON THE VIDEO . . .
THEY'VE GOT TO HIM!
A MERCENARY HURLED HIS DAGGER AT THE OLD MAN. THE BLADE SLICED DEEP INTO SALUD'S CHEST. THE MERCENARY TURNED, AND SAW DANE'S FACE STARING AT HIM FROM THE VIDEO SCREEN.
JAL! HE'S DOWN IN THE LAUNCHING BAYS . . .
AFTER HIM! GET JAL!

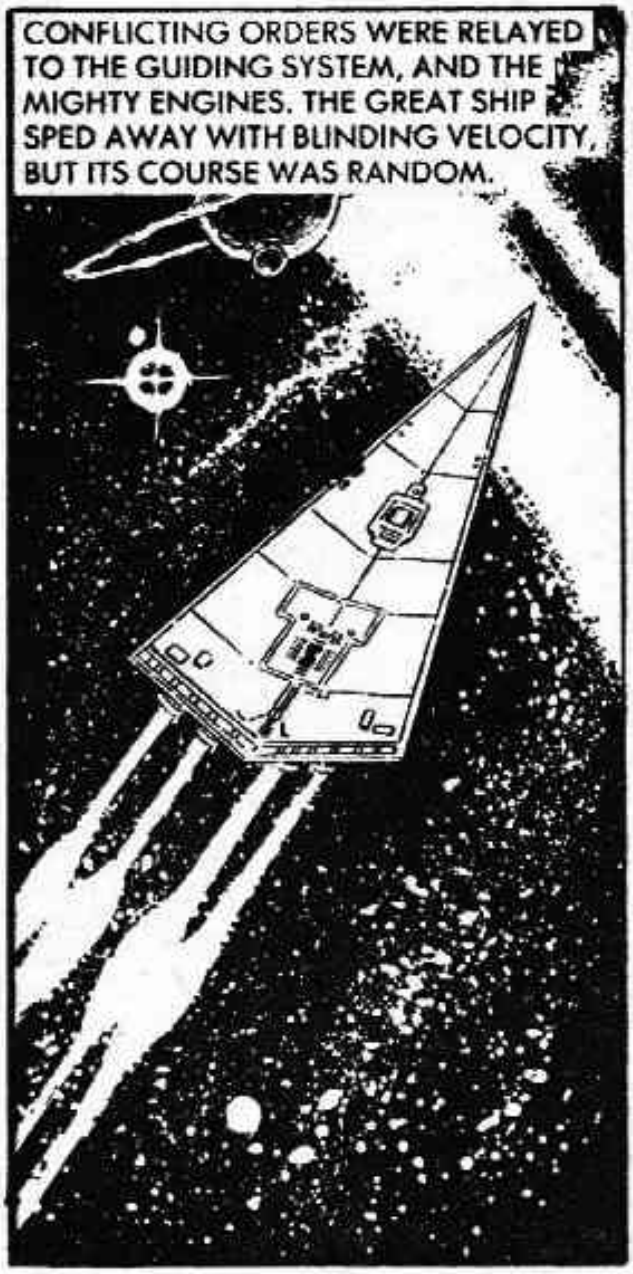
THE SCREEN WENT BLANK AS DANE AND PRIL FLED —
SALUD'S DEAD SO WE MIGHT AS WELL BLAST OUR WAY OUT OF HERE! BRING THE FIRESTICKS AND ANYTHING ELSE WE MIGHT BE ABLE TO USE.
NOW YOU'RE TALKING SENSE! LET'S GO!

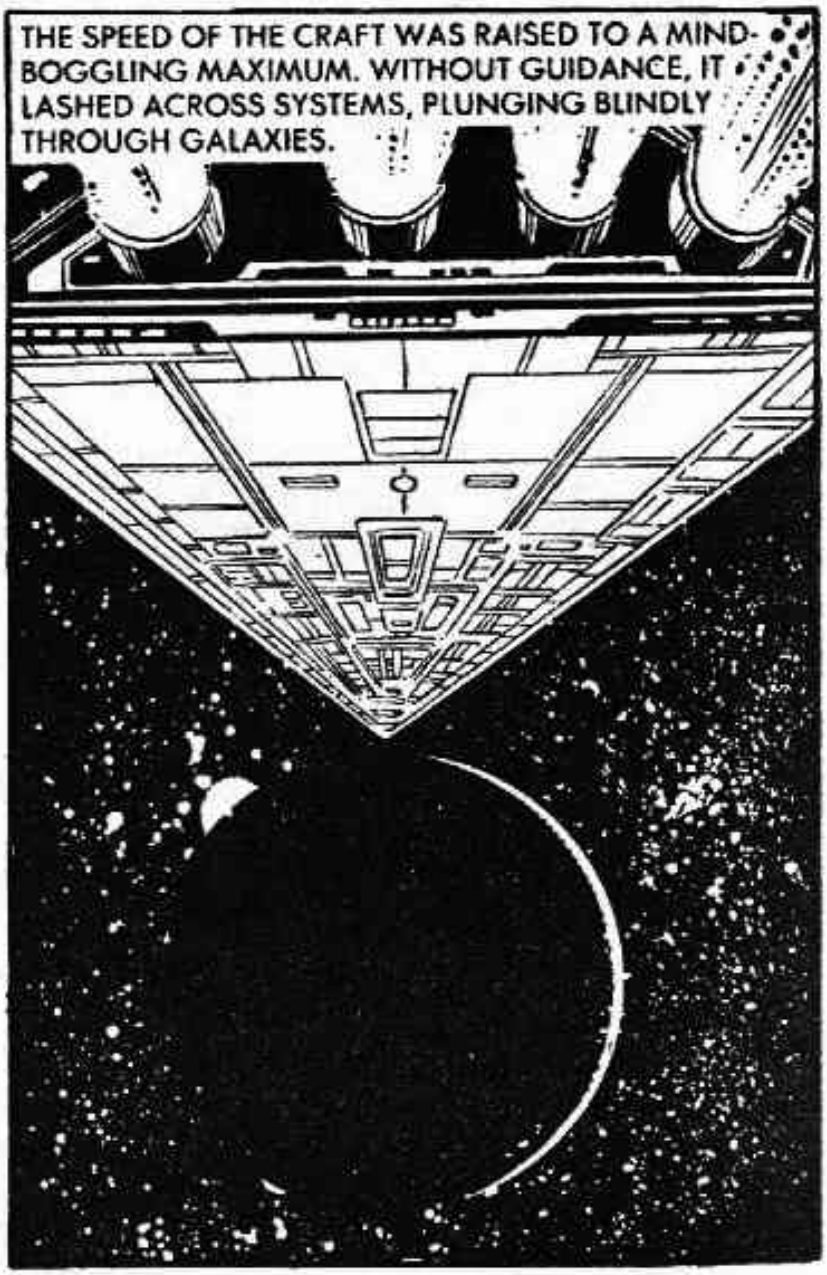
BUT THEIR FLIGHT INTO THE CRAFT WAS SEEN.
THEY'RE LEAVING THE SHIP! REPORT BACK TO OUR CRAFT . . . WE'LL CAPTURE THEM. JAL MUSTN'T GET AWAY!
AS THE CRAFT ESCAPED —
THEY STILL THINK I'M JAL! WONDER WHY THEY WANT HIM SO BADLY?

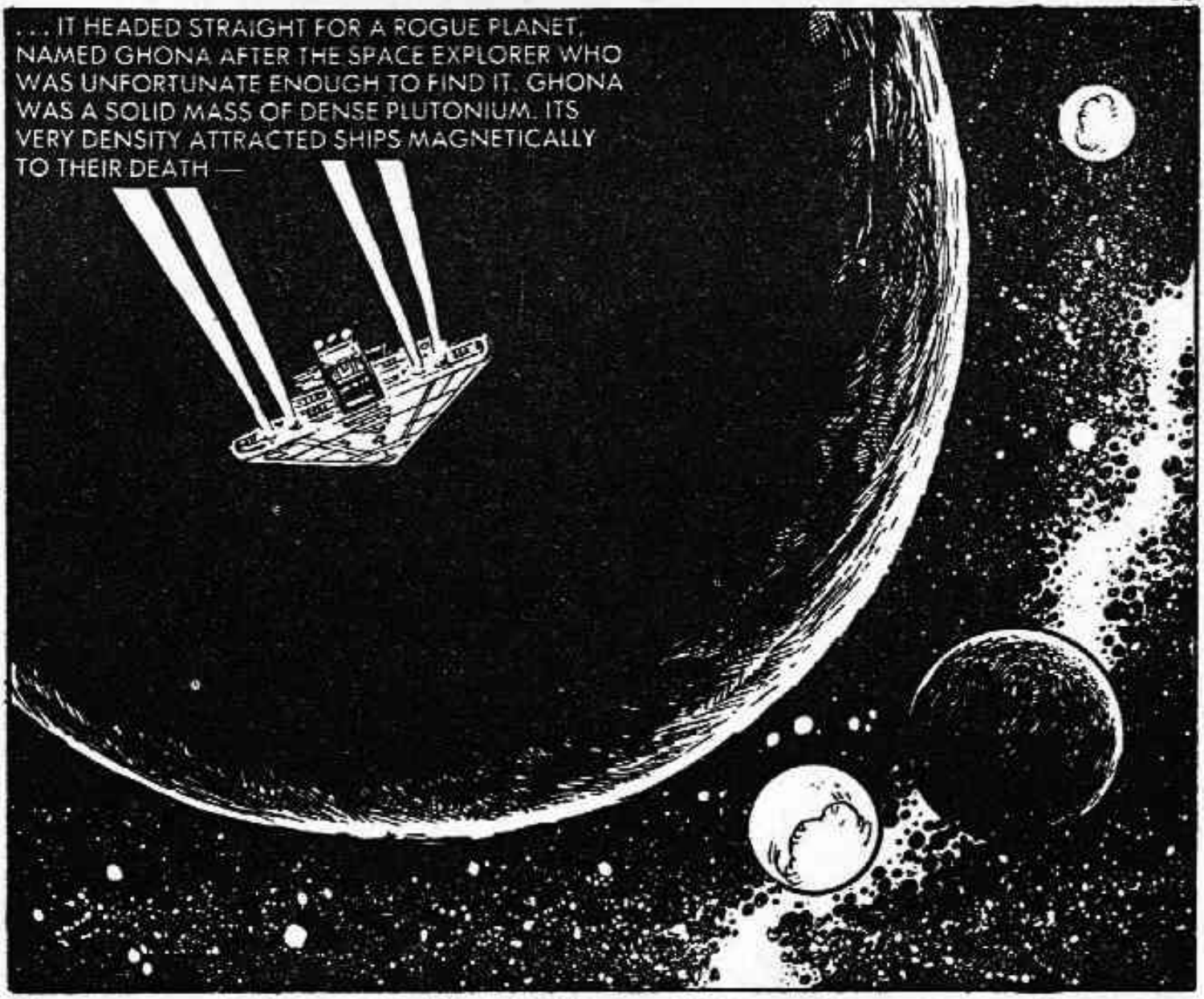

BACK ON THE ALIEN CRAFT, SALUD, BARELY ALIVE, STRUGGLED TO HIS FEET —
I MUST GET JAL HOME . . . THAT ABOVE ALL ELSE. THE SHIP WILL TAKE US . . .


HIS FAILING FINGERS FUMBLED FOR THE CONTROL THAT WOULD PUT THE ENTIRE SHIP ON ITS AUTOMATIC FLIGHT HOME.
I CANNOT FAIL! SALUD MUST NOT FAIL!

BUT HIS STRENGTH LEFT HIM. HE FELT HIMSELF TO BE HURTLING INTO A VAST PIT OF BLACKNESS. AND AS HE DIED, HIS FINGERS JERKED CONVULSIVELY. THE AUTOMATIC CONTROL WAS NOT PRESSED. BUT SEVERAL OTHERS WERE!


CONFLICTING ORDERS WERE RELAYED TO THE GUIDING SYSTEM, AND THE MIGHTY ENGINES. THE GREAT SHIP SPED AWAY WITH BLINDING VELOCITY, BUT ITS COURSE WAS RANDOM.


THE SPEED OF THE CRAFT WAS RAISED TO A MIND-BOGGLING MAXIMUM. WITHOUT GUIDANCE, IT LASHED ACROSS SYSTEMS, PLUNGING BLINDLY THROUGH GALAXIES.


. . . IT HEADED STRAIGHT FOR A ROGUE PLANET, NAMED GHONA AFTER THE SPACE EXPLORER WHO WAS UNFORTUNATE ENOUGH TO FIND IT. GHONA WAS A SOLID MASS OF DENSE PLUTONIUM. ITS VERY DENSITY ATTRACTED SHIPS MAGNETICALLY TO THEIR DEATH —

IN A BLINDING EXPLOSION, THE CRAFT DISINTEGRATED INTO A CLOUD OF COSMIC DUST —

FAR, FAR AWAY, ANTARES MOVED ALONG ITS TURGID ORBIT AND ON THE BLACK, AWESOME MASS WAS THE LAST OF THE ROYAL LINE —

— A DYING KING WAITED FOR SALUD'S RETURN. PERHAPS, IN HIS SECRET HEART, HE ALREADY KNEW HE WOULD NEVER SEE HIS SON AGAIN. AND ALL HE COULD SEE AS HE STARED INTO HIS OWN BLEAK SHORT FUTURE, WAS THE DISSOLUTION OF HIS KINGDOM.

MANY LIGHT YEARS FROM ANTARES, DANE AND PRIL TESTED THE POWER OF THEIR NEW CRAFT —

WE HAVE TO FAMILIARISE OURSELVES WITH THIS CRAFT VERY QUICKLY . . .

. . .YES, OTHERWISE WHOEVER'S CHASING US WILL FINISH US!

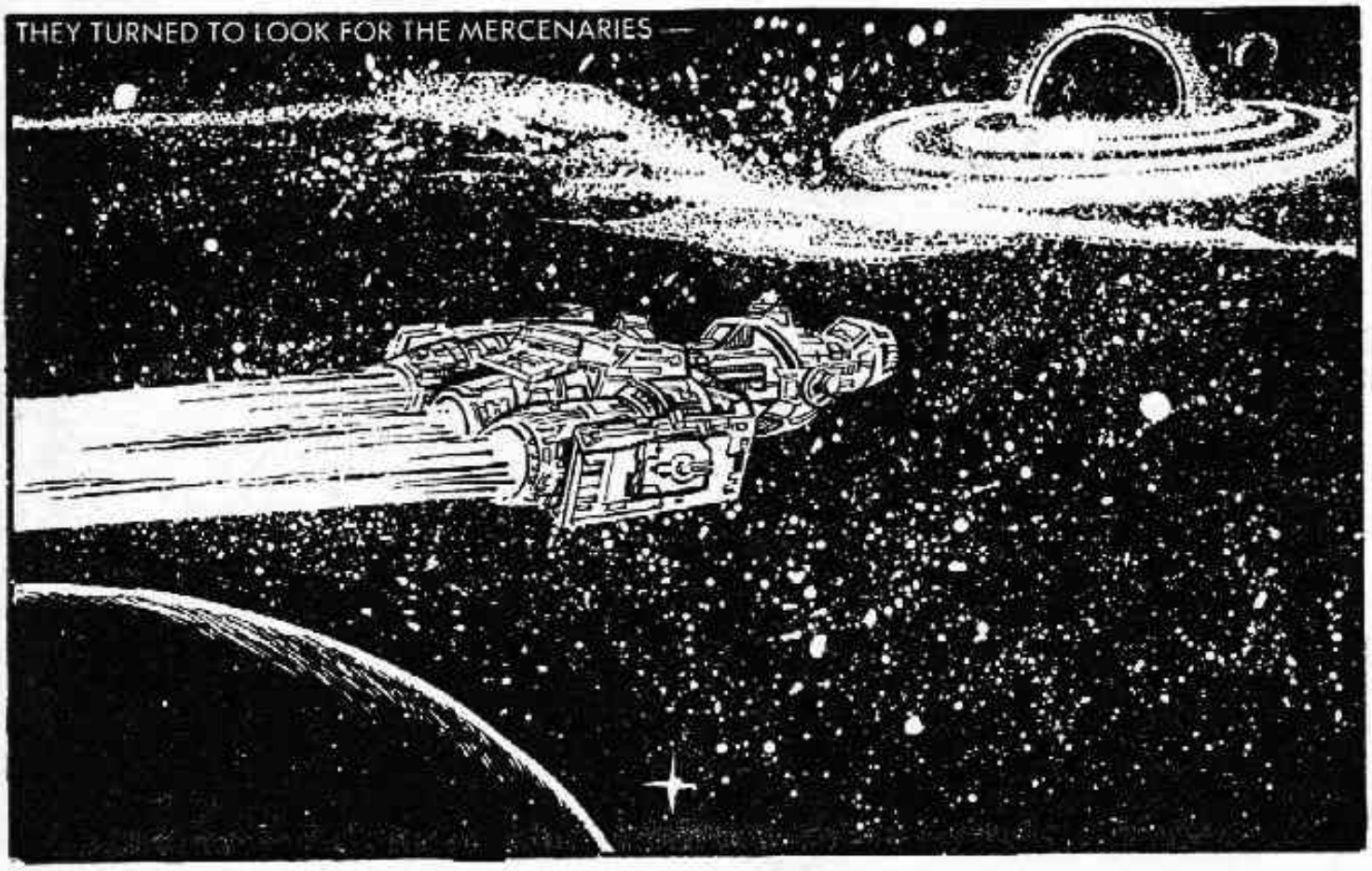
THEY TESTED VARIOUS CIRCUITS —

NOW WE'LL CONTACT EARTH!

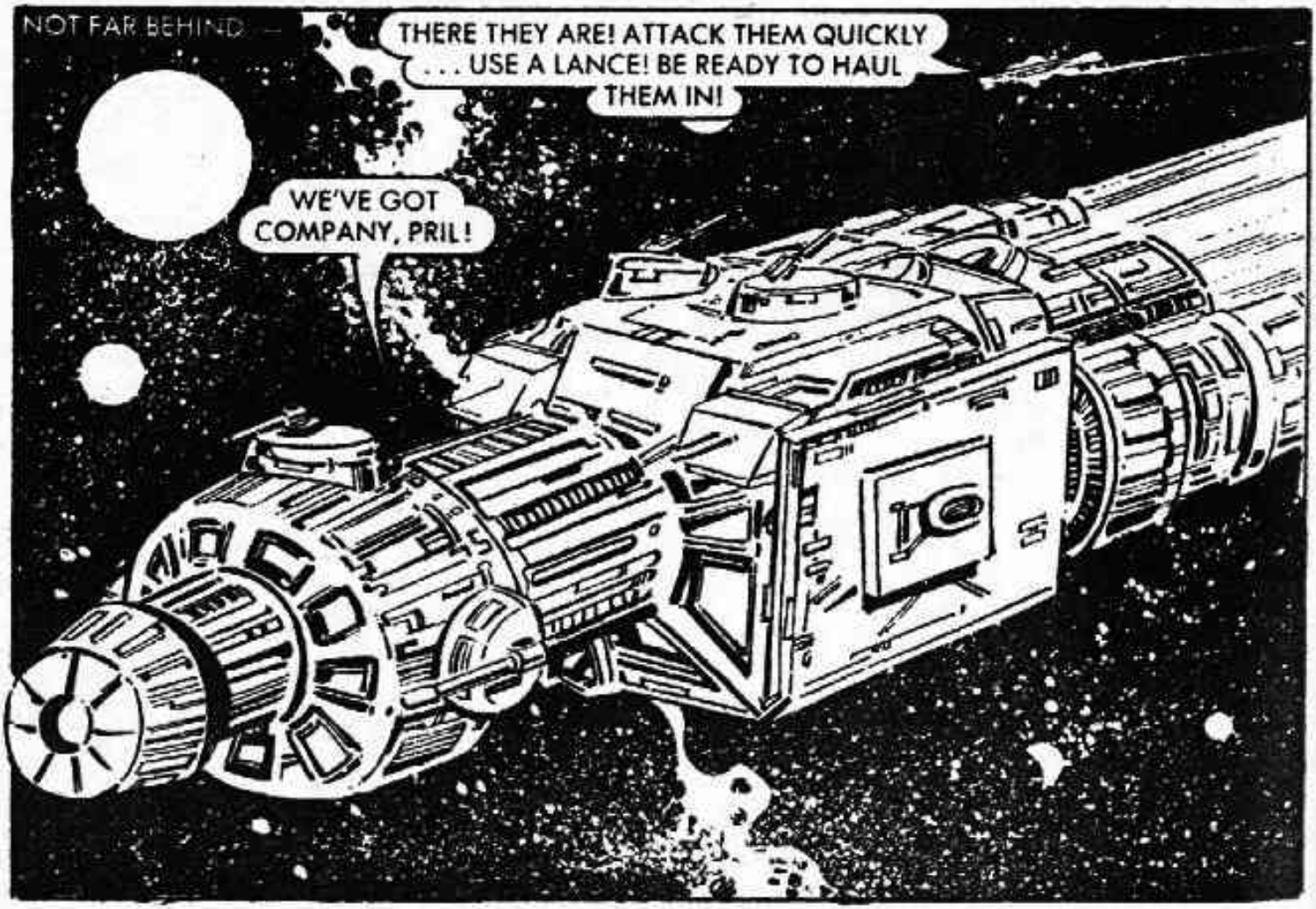
THEY CONTACTED EARTH AND TOLD THEM THE BONES OF THE STORY.
. . . SO THAT'S ALL FOR NOW! WE'RE ON THE LOOKOUT FOR OUR PURSUERS.

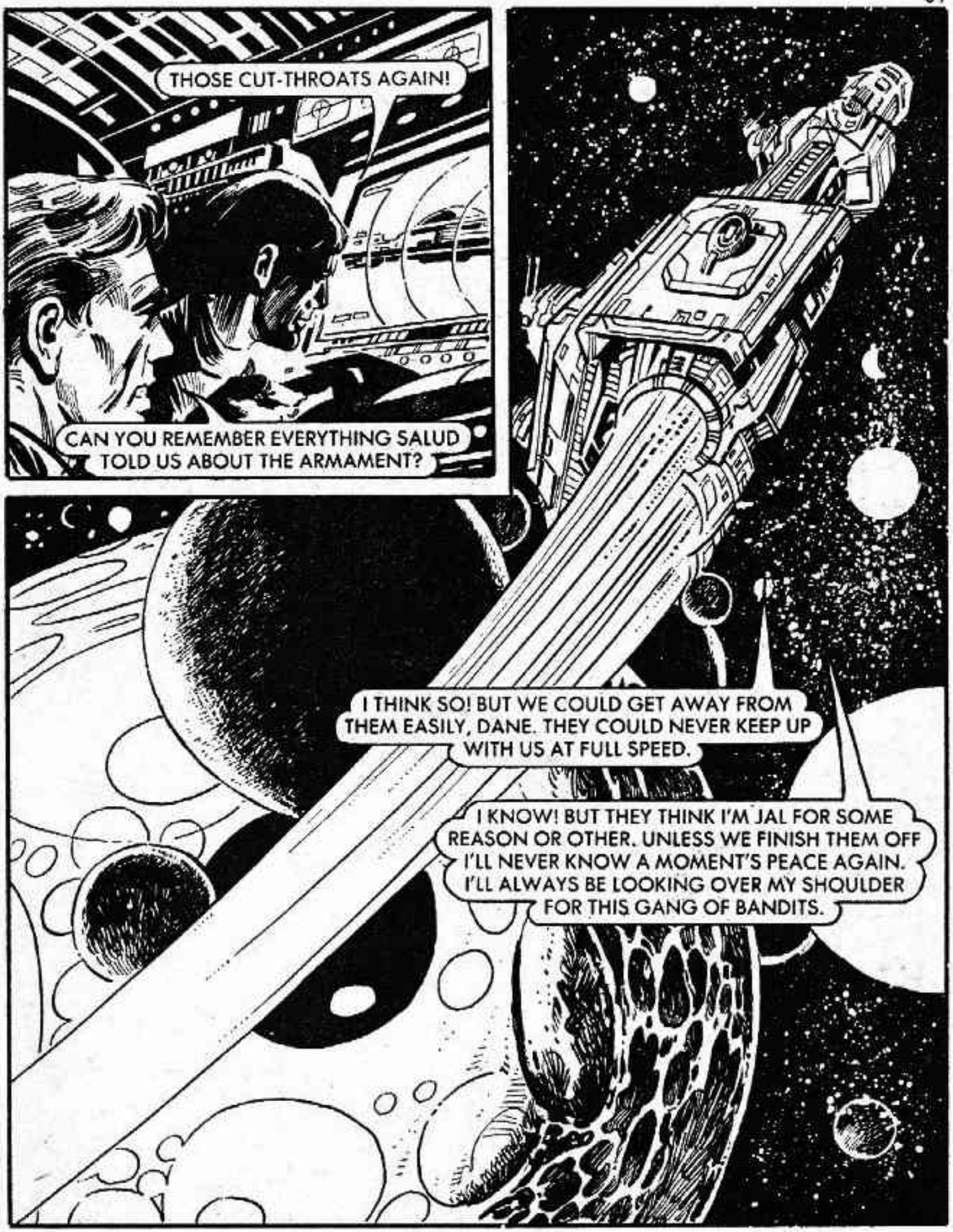
WHERE'S THE ALIEN SHIP NOW, THEN?
GONE HOME! HE WON'T BOTHER US AGAIN!

WE'RE SIGNING OFF FOR NOW . . . SCANNERS ARE SEARCHING FOR OUR PURSUER.


THEY TURNED TO LOOK FOR THE MERCENARIES —

DANE SET THE SCANNERS —
CONTACT

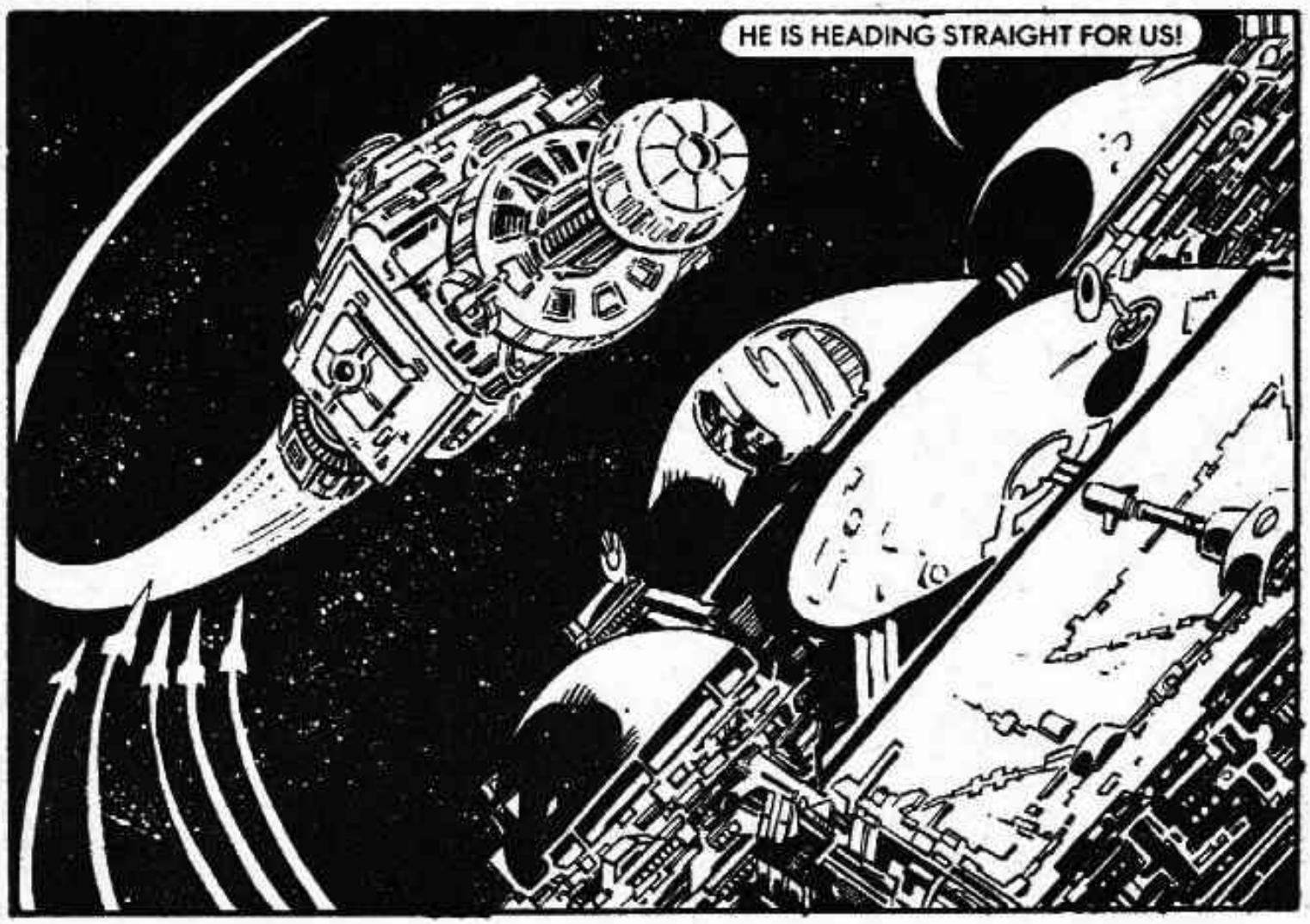

NOT FAR BEHIND —
THERE THEY ARE! ATTACK THEM QUICKLY . . . USE A LANCE! BE READY TO HAUL THEM IN!
WE'VE GOT COMPANY, PRIL!

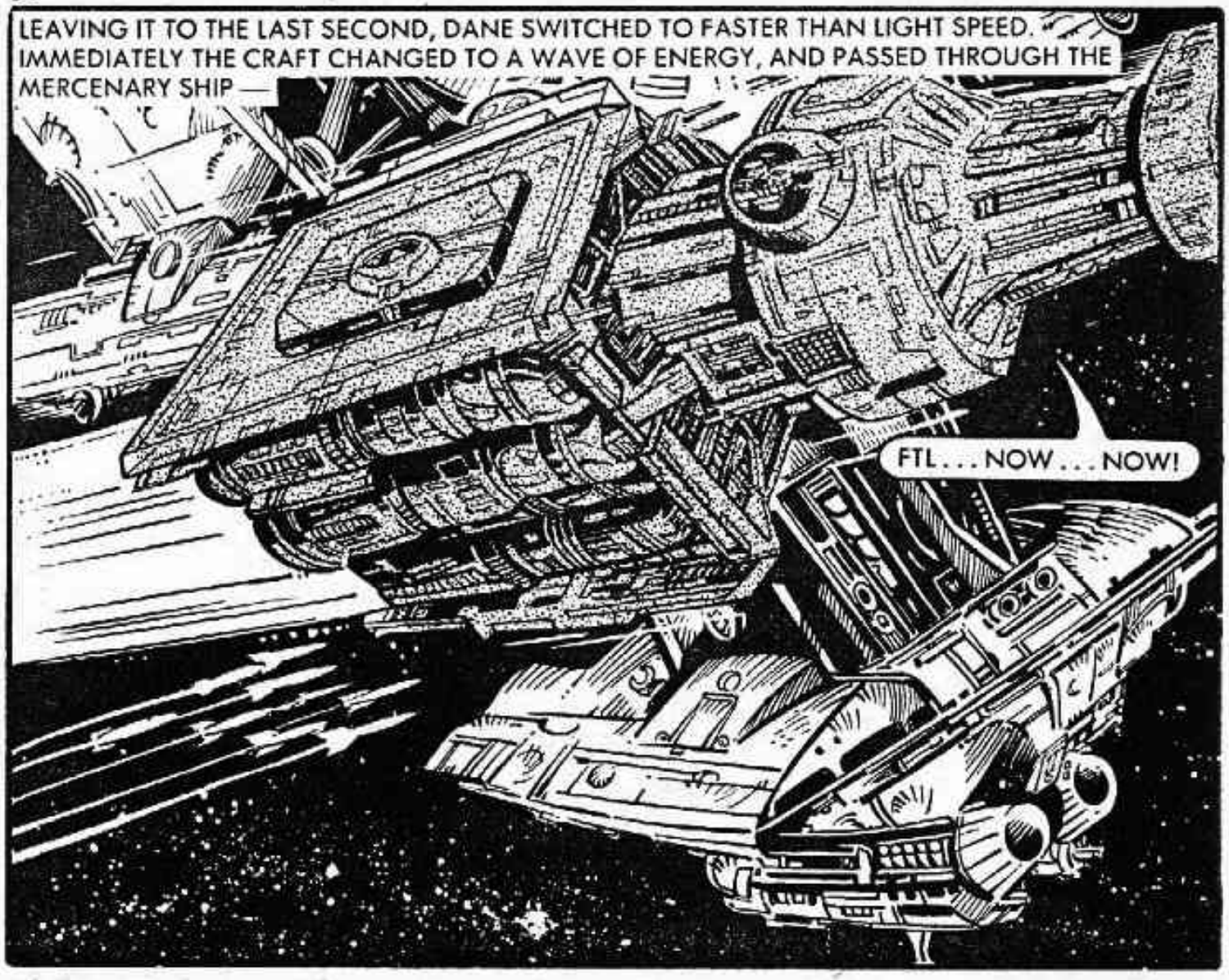

THOSE CUT-THROATS AGAIN!
CAN YOU REMEMBER EVERYTHING SALUD TOLD US ABOUT THE ARMAMENT?
I THINK SO! BUT WE COULD GET AWAY FROM THEM EASILY, DANE. THEY COULD NEVER KEEP UP WITH US AT FULL SPEED.
I KNOW! BUT THEY THINK I'M JAL FOR SOME REASON OR OTHER. UNLESS WE FINISH THEM OFF I'LL NEVER KNOW A MOMENT'S PEACE AGAIN. I'LL ALWAYS BE LOOKING OVER MY SHOULDER FOR THIS GANG OF BANDITS.

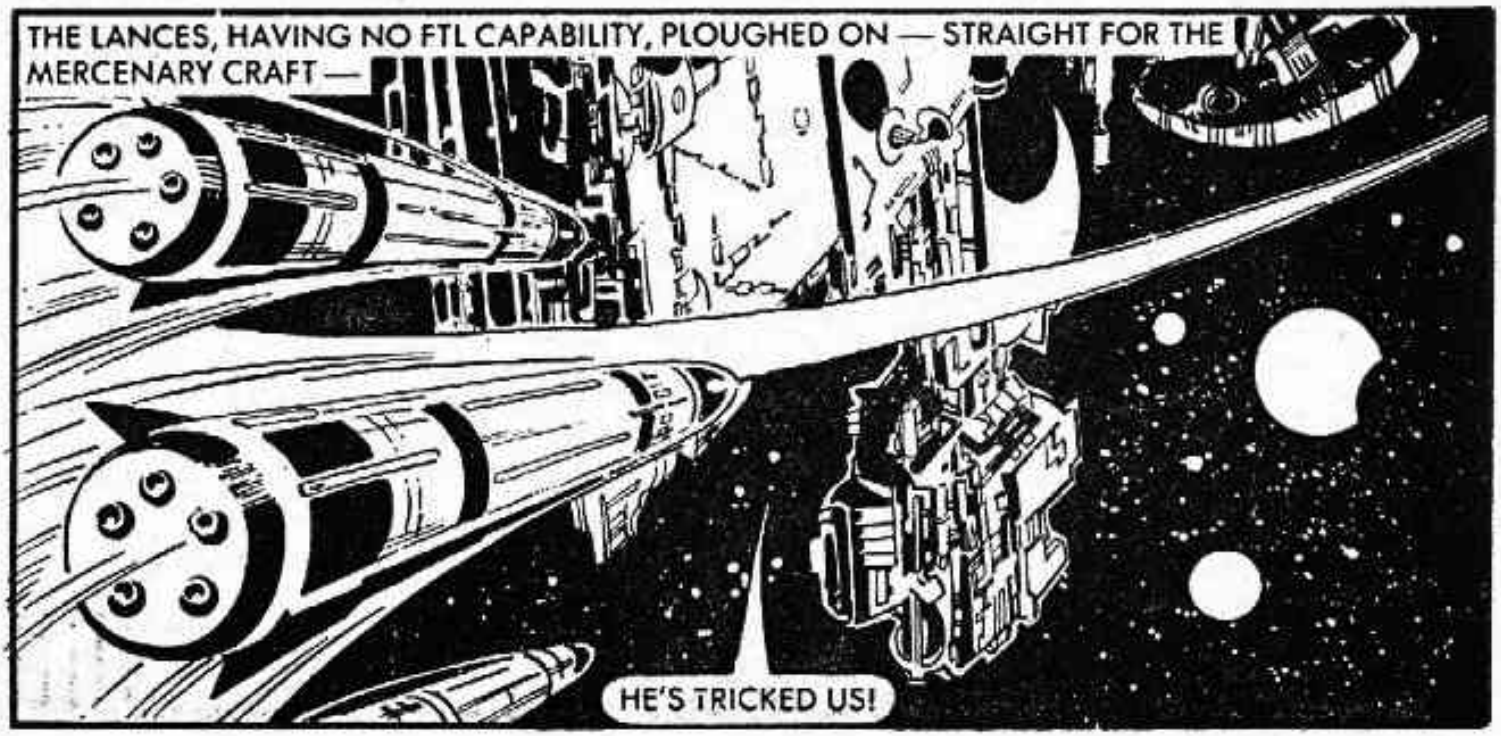
THE MERCENARY CRAFT RAPIDLY CAUGHT UP —
STAND BY WITH THE LANCES!
FIRE!

LANCES THUNDERED FROM THE NOSE OF THE CRAFT. ON AUTOMATIC THE AWESOME MISSILES FOLLOWED DANE'S CRAFT. NOTHING COULD SHAKE THEM OFF.
SALVO COMING OUR WAY, DANE.
I SEE THEM.

THE MERCENARIES GAPED AS DANE REACTED BY ACCELERATING —
WHAT SPEED!
FEAR NOUGHT! THE LANCES SHALL FOLLOW!

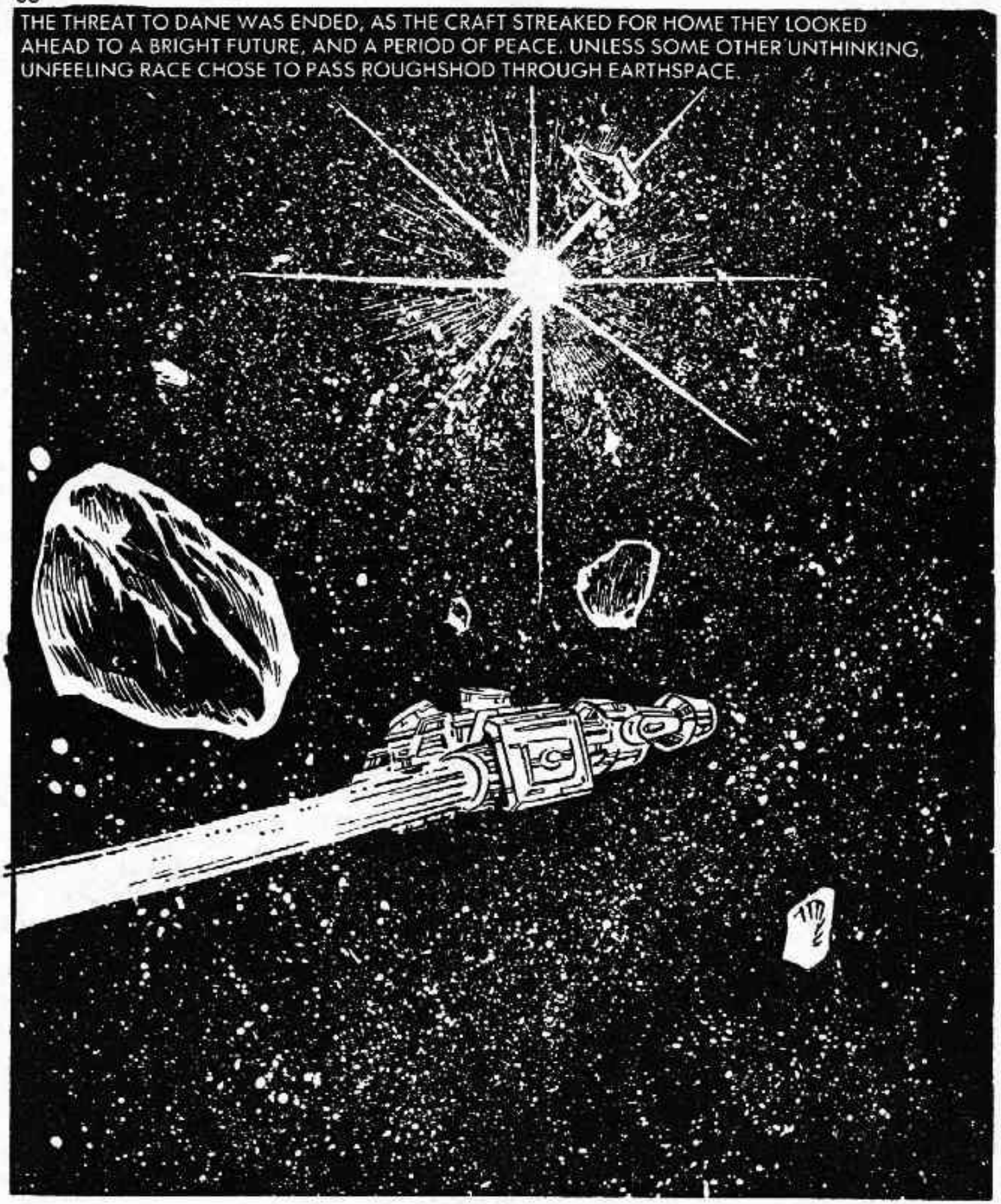

HE IS HEADING STRAIGHT FOR US!


LEAVING IT TO THE LAST SECOND, DANE SWITCHED TO FASTER THAN LIGHT SPEED. IMMEDIATELY THE CRAFT CHANGED TO A WAVE OF ENERGY, AND PASSED THROUGH THE MERCENARY SHIP —
FTL . . . NOW . . . NOW!


THE LANCES, HAVING NO FTL CAPABILITY, PLOUGHED ON — STRAIGHT FOR THE MERCENARY CRAFT —
HE'S TRICKED US!

THEN THE SHIP WAS NO MORE —

THE CRAFT VANISHED IN A SCURRY OF FLAME. DEBRIS WAS FLUNG AWAY, PROPELLED BY THE EXPLOSION, DESTINED TO DRIFT THE BLACK REACHES OF SPACE FOREVER.



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During the group flight involving Soyuz 6, 7 and 8, five first time cosmonauts were amongst the seven spacemen. Two were aboard Soyuz 6. Lieutenant Colonel Georgi Stepanovich Shonin 34, and Valeri Nikolayevich Kubasov were launched on October 11, 1969. Their mission lasted 4 days 22 hrs. 42 mins. Kubasov flew on the USSR-USA joint space mission on July 15, 1975 which lasted for 5 days 22 hrs. 31 mins., and lastly as commander of Soyuz 36 on May 26, 1980. This mission lasted 7 days 20 hrs. 46 mins.